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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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The makers of POLIDENT offer you Double Your Money Back unless this

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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

Giant western

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 9
NO. 2

APRIL
1952

A FULL-LENGTH NOVEL

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The bounty was good—and scalps were bountiful

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SAMUEL MINES, *Editor*

GIANT WESTERN. Published every month and copyright 1952 by Best Publications, Inc., 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Subscription: (12 issues), $3.00; single copies, $.25; foreign postage extra. Entered as second-class matter at the post office at Kokomo, Ind., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Material is submitted at risk of the sender and must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes. All characters in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. April, 1952, issue. PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.

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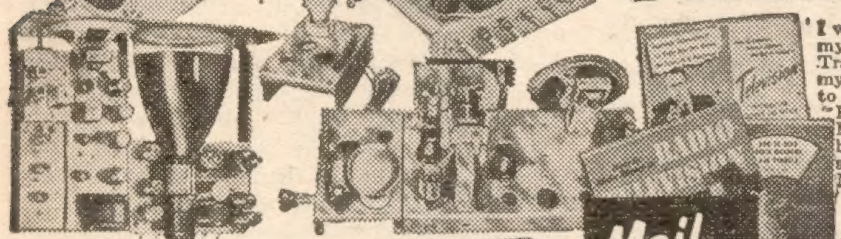

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FUR, FINS and FEATHERS

A Department Conducted by FRANCIS H. AMES, Hunting and Fishing Expert

APRIL means spring to most folks. Even in the high snow country the chinook winds of late March have brought out the brown hilltops, started the creeks running. A man's blood quickens with the scent of open water, after the long months of ice and freezing. He thinks of dreamy spring days and the old fishing hole.

Being somewhat of a postponing and indolent cuss myself, I shouldn't be passing out advice on readiness. But nevertheless, this is the time to overhaul your fishing gear if you haven't done it previous. I meet gents every spring on our lakes and streams who have got caught short with frozen-up reels, loose rod ferrules, pulled out guides, rotten lines, rusty and dull hooks, leaky waders and rain coats.

A gent with his boots full of water, wet from the neck down, is a pitiful object after he loses a choice fish when something falls apart on him.

It is amazing how many things you can find wrong with your fishing gear if you'll give it the critical eye. The big buster that you tried for last fall may be in a biting mood this spring. Lose him through neglect of your gear and you'll be a right sorry hombre.

Last spring, on the Beaver, I saw a character lace into a late run steelhead trout while angling for smaller fish. The man was a skilled angler, the fish three feet long and full of vinegar, leaping all over the place. It was a real show until an eight pound leader broke a supposedly twenty pound line. The line was rotten. An ounce of preparation in April would have saved this fish in May.

A man invites trouble of this sort when he fails to take his reels apart, clean, oil and tighten them before the fishing season opens in spring. A trace of moisture that would not cramp their style last fall may have turned into a pile of muck and rust that will this spring. Nylon leaders, used mostly today, won't rot, but silk lines will. Nylon lines laid away in the fall may have been weakened at the casting point. If any sign of wear shows, break off a portion from the end and test the balance for strength.

Check rod ferrules for looseness. If they have any, heat over a candle, pull off, scrape the rod clean of old cement, reseat with new rod ferrule cement. Often you'll find some of the snake guides on your fly rod to be pulled loose at one end.

Take off the old wrapping and install new. All wrappings should have a coat of finger nail polish to hold the color, followed by a coat of rod varnish. Otherwise silk wrappings will turn white and rot.

Inspect your rod guides for line wear. I know of hombres that wear out valuable lines with grooved guides, year after year, without knowing what's wrong. Sharpen hook points with a small whetstone, check creels for broken weave.

Leaky boots and waders can spoil a spring fishing trip and bring you down with the shivers and shakes. Take your boots or waders into a dark closet and put a flashlight inside them. Stretch and pull the fabric. Light will shine through even tiny holes. Circle them with a pencil mark and patch them with inner tube patches. Coat the inside at the hole point with rubber cement. This sound advice was given to me by Ted Trueblood, Associate Editor of *Field and Stream.* Raincoats can often be waterproofed at slightly leaky points by the mere application of rubber cement.

The gent losing the steelhead trout on the Beaver reminds me of the Montana puncher that climbed a regular string horse in the spring. The bronc came apart with a bang, sailing the puncher through the spring slush. He sat up with a pained expression.

"Damn it," he complained, "that broomtail was plumb gentle last fall."

Perhaps your fishing gear was plumb gentle last fall. This spring it may come apart when you least expect it.

For Questions and Answers, See Page 130

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TO PEOPLE Who Want To Write

but can't get started

Do you have that constant urge to write but fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of Liberty said on this subject:

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A Book Bargain ROUNDUP

by TEX MUMFORD

WELL, you're probably just about through with this issue of GIANT WESTERN (How do we know that?—because the first thing you read is the stories, natch!)—so now you might take a look at the book titles below; they'll keep you entertained until the next GW comes around. Old Mumford has poked 'em and prodded 'em, and examined their eyes and hooves and mouths, and he gives them a clean bill of health. They're as full of pep as a yearling, as red-blooded as a longhorn, as enjoyable as a broiled sirloin . . . and only 25c at your nearest newsstand. So . . . good reading, and we'll have more culled from the herd for you next issue!

TRAIL SMOKE, by Ernest Haycox

Buck Surratt was a "gentleman gunfighter," one of that cow-country breed whose deadly skill with a Colt was matched by their decent and law abiding instincts. Buck's gun-rep had been earned in an unusual way—by his relentless pursuit and wiping out, in fair fights, of the men who had murdered his father. Now this task was almost done, and Buck looked forward to settling down . . . but the very night he arrived in the Gray Bull country there was a mysterious shot . . . and Buck Surratt found himself in the middle of a raging cattle-sheep war, where only his fighting blood and swift sixes could keep him above ground!

How Buck Surratt defied the range-hogs who had controlled Gray Bull for generations, with his only ally a girl whose heart was as fierce as his own, makes for thrilling western reading—the kind you find only in Ernest Haycox's famous novels!

•

MONTANA ROAD, by Harry Sinclair Drago

Stephen Glen was an impassioned defender of Indian rights—but it didn't take him very long in his new post as agent at the Sweetwater Dakota Station to learn that "Indian lovers" were a despised breed. That only made his job more difficult, for he was grimly determined to see the red man get a decent break. In the months that followed, he saw the Indians debauched by the white man's greed, uprooted from their homes, driven from their hunting grounds. He fought bitterly and tirelessly, but his efforts were only resented by white and red man alike. Then, suddenly, all hell broke loose in the bloody shambles of Custer's Last Stand—and Stephen Glen, staunch defender of red men, was fated to die at Indian hands!

The story of Glen's uphill fight against injustice and renegade whites, his stubborn battle to win peace for the land and the girl he loved, combines romance with high adventure . . . it is a tale of America's most colorful and exciting period, told by a master storyteller.

Don't miss it!

•

BONANZA GULCH, by Matt Stuart

Time changes a man—and Time had changed Jim Teague's old sidekick, Rupe Caldwell, into a ruthless hardcase. Rupe had sent Jim a message for help, saying that he had struck it rich and was now being mysteriously threatened—but when Jim arrived in Bonanza Gulch he discovered that Rupe had obtained his rich claim through murder and fraud and the assistance of a crooked sheriff—and that the threats Rupe had mentioned were really the angry mutterings of honest men who had been robbed and pushed around, and had seen their friends shot down by Rupe's gunnies!

It took Jim Teague a while to find this out, unfortunately—long enough so that, when he finally called it quits with Rufe, he found himself regarded as an enemy by **both** sides! Only Janet Sherrill, whose father had been one of Rufe's victims, stood by his side through the bitter days that followed—the days of hard riding and bushwhacking, mystery and sudden death, that led to the smashing powder-smoke payoff in a tiny mountain valley . . . from which only one man could return alive!

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for this outstanding new Family Protection

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Examine This Policy Without Cost or Obligation—Read It—Talk It Over—Then Decide

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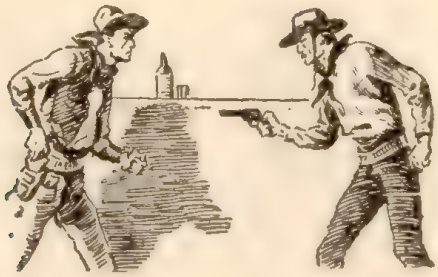
The Corpse That Walked

A True Story of Tombstone Hi-Jinks

By NORMAN B. WILTSEY



THE hell-roaring mining town of Tombstone, Arizona, was far better known for gun fights than gayety, but grizzled oldtimers of Tombstone still insist that more and rowdier practical jokes were pulled off in their town than anywhere else on earth. Looking at the record, it becomes evident that they are probably right.

Take Burt Alvord as a typical example of the irrepressible Tombstone joker. Burt, a tough, trigger-happy character who eventually got himself gravely involved in train robbing and murder, possessed a cockeyed sense of humor that kept all Tombstone laughing at him when it should have run him out of town.

Burt and his pal Matt Burts went over to Bisbee for a spree one day in 1890.

After hitting the saloons, girl-cribs and gambling joints all one hectic night, Matt was quite willing to return to their hotel and snooze it off.

Burt—lively as ever after a sunrise breakfast of ham and eggs—left Matt snoring in his hotel bed and strolled down the street to the telegraph office, where he wired to the editor of the Tombstone *Epitaph* the following mournful message:

BODIES OF BURTS AND ALVORD WILL ARRIVE THIS AFTERNOON.

No details, no signature, nothing more than the grim nine-word message.

Chuckling to himself, Burt went back to the hotel to rout the profanely protesting Matt out of the sack and catch the stage for Tombstone.

Back in Tombstone the excited news flew all over town that Burt Alvord and Matt Burts had been killed in a gun fight in Bisbee, and that their bullet-riddled bodies were arriving on the afternoon stage.

The *Epitaph* sent a reporter to cover the story, and the boys' Mexican sweethearts, as well as half the adult males in town, were on hand to meet the stage.

The girls were weeping hysterically and even the men were sad, for Matt and Burt were well liked for all their erratic behavior.

The dusty coach rolled slowly up to the stage platform at the O. K. Corral and the passengers alighted, but there was no sign of corpses aboard. Suddenly there was a wild commotion in the interior of the coach and Burt Alvord and Matt Burts stepped out, roaring with laughter.

"Here we are, *querida mia*—bodies and all!" bellowed Burt, giving his girl a mighty smack.

Disgustedly, the newspaper man went back to his office to write a caustic paragraph on the two jokers that ended wearily with the words: "Probably when Gabriel blows his horn they will be old enough to quit acting like boys."

GUN FLAME

A Novel by WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

I

SIX YEARS of riding with Matt Wildew had taught Rick Malone many things about the gunman. Wildew was a killer, a professional who wore his .44 in a tied-down holster on his right hip, a man whose blinding speed on the draw was never hampered by the burden of an exacting conscience.

Yet, paradoxically, Rick had learned that Wildew seemed to have his own strict code. As long as Rick had known him, his word had been his bond. When he took his job, his soul went with his gun.

Now, lying on his side in the Bent R bunkhouse, Rick watched Wildew playing solitaire. Rick thought of the things the gunman had tried to teach him. He had not learned some of them. To that extent he was a disappointment to Wildew, and he was glad of it.

"The damned cards won't come up," Wildew said angrily as he began to shuffle. "That makes three times in a row I've lost."

"You can't beat your luck when it's running bad," Rick said.

"That's right, kid." Wildew laid the cards down. "Our luck turned on us all around. It's been a good job, though. Good pay, good grub, and no real hard work. Now it's over, looks like."

Rick sat up and rolled a smoke. They had not talked about their plans since Vance Spargo had been shot. Now Rick knew how it would be. Wildew would drift on just as he had for years,

Rick slashed at Kinnear's face with a sledging right

"Conscience makes cowards of us all," said Shakespeare, but—his conscience made a brave man of Rick Malone!

but Rick was staying, and it was going to be hard to tell him.

"Yeah, reckon it's over," Rick agreed, and fired his cigarette.

Wildew pinned his pale blue eyes on Rick's face. He was forty-six, a slender man with a narrow, deep-lined face and a fringe of white at the temples. Rick often thought of him as a machine devoid of emotion. Or at least it seemed so when he chose to hide his thoughts and feelings behind expressionless eyes as he did now.

"Funny thing about a man like Vance Spargo," Wildew murmured. "He spends years building an outfit like the Hatchet. Gets so damned big he don't have to answer to nobody, but a slug cuts him down same at it does a little fellow."

Rick got up and moved to the bunkhouse door. Twilight had given way to night, and the faint glow of scarlet lingering above the western rimrock would soon be gone. Rick could see the lighted lamp in old Lou Rawlin's office window. The rest of the ranchhouse was dark, but Nan, Lou's granddaughter, was there somewhere, waiting for the last light to fade. Then Rick would meet her in the pines back of the house.

HE HATED it, this hiding and dodging and hoping that Rawlins wouldn't find out they were in love. Now it would have to come out. With Vance Spargo dead, the old man would have no further use for a pair of gunhawks.

"We've never been in Arizona," Wildew said tentatively. "Tucson would be a good place to spend the winter."

"I ain't going," Rick said.

Standing with his back to the gunman, he could hear his breathing, and felt the faint stirring of regret. When you ride with a man for six years, habits are hard to break. You know the other man's weaknesses and strengths, and when the chips are down, you know the kind of odds you can accept and still come out alive, providing you have average luck.

That was the point. Rick had had better than average luck from the time he had thrown in with Wildew. Sooner or later it would turn sour. Rick had seen it happen and he'd heard Wildew talk about gun-fighters who wound up in Boot Hill because something had gone wrong. If a man lived by the gun long enough, he died by the gun. It was the destiny of men like Matt Wildew, but it was not what Rick wanted. Not after falling in love with Nan Rawlins.

"You like it here?" Wildew asked.

"That's it. I'm going to go to work."

Wildew murmured, "Counter jumping maybe while you starve to death saving enough *dinero* to impress Lou?"

"No. I'll get a job on a ranch."

"Not on the Bent R you won't," Wildew said. "When the old boy finds out you've been making calf eyes at Nan, he'll kick your seat from here to Bald Rock."

"Then I'll get a job on some other spread. Nan will wait for me."

"It's great to be young and in love." Wildew rose and walked to the door. "You and me have been together a long time, kid."

Wildew's face was as expressionless as ever, but Rick sensed the feeling in him, as much feeling as the gunman was capable of having. Rick said, "I know, Matt. But I don't see no future in our way of living. I'm going to break it off clean."

"For thirty a month and found," Wildew said contemptuously. "We can get work in Arizona, kid. There's alway trouble along the Border, and folks who need a pair like us."

Rick shook his head. "I can't do it, Matt."

He stepped outside. Wildew said, "Wait, Rick."

Rick turned. "No use arguing about it, Matt."

"I ain't arguing," Wildew said mildly. "Just wanted to say I'll hang

RICK MALONE

around a few days. Something might turn up."

"Not with Spargo dead. Lou will move in on Hatchet range as soon as they plant Spargo."

"There's the Diamond J," Wildew reminded him. "And Grant Jenner. You never know about setups like this. Throw a bone to a couple of mean dogs and they'll fight over it."

"Not Jenner," Rick said, and left the bunkhouse.

There were still just two lighted lamps, one in the bunkhouse and the other in Lou's office, their long yellow fingers thrown out across the hard-packed earth of the yard. He thought of Nan wanting a lawn and some flowers, and how Rawlins laughed at her.

He moved toward the pines, his mind turning to Grant Jenner and his Diamond J, a fair-sized spread across the river, about as big as the Bent R. Both had suffered from Spargo's bullying, and they had thrown in together to make the fight against the Hatchet, but alongside tough old Lou Rawlins, Grant Jenner was as soft as custard pudding.

Without Lou to stiffen his backbone, Jenner would have sold out when Spargo had given them his ultimatum last spring. No, there would never be any trouble between the Bent R and Jenner's Diamond J. They'd divide Hatchet range and hold it if they could, with old Lou the big gun on Pine River as he had been years ago and wanted to be again.

"Rick."

ALMOST in the pines, he heard Nan's low call. He quickened his steps. She came to him, her hands outstretched. He took them, looking down at her, his love for this slim, blonde girl rushing through him like a hot breath of flame.

"I've been waiting for five minutes, Rick," she whispered.

"I'm sorry."

He kissed her, her arms coming up around his neck and clutching him with fierce longing. In this moment of sweetness all his problems were swept away. Just the two of them, and Lou Rawlins with his greed and longing for power did not exist.

She drew back, saying softly, "I love you so much, Rick. Sometimes I can't believe its possible."

He laughed. "I think the same thing."

She gripped his arm. "Don't let anything destroy it, Rick!"

He knew what she meant. She had told him more than once that if he kept on with Matt Wildew he'd wind up just like the gunman, tough and incapable of loving anything or anyone. A killing machine!

"Nothing can destroy it," he said fiercely. "Matt wants to light out for Arizona. I told him I was staying."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't like it." Rick took a long breath. "I feel kind of bad about it. We've been together quite a spell."

She pulled her arm back. "You've got to decide, Rick."

"I have," he said quickly. "But Matt did say one thing that made sense. He claims Lou will kick me from here to Bald Rock when he finds out about us."

"Then he'll kick me, too!" she cried. "He ran Dad's life, and he's run mine up till now. It's time I was living the way I want to live."

"I haven't saved much," he said miserably. "I can't support you on a cowboy's wages."

"Then I'll work, too. Listen, Rick. I've seen women just wait and hope and get old. I won't do it! Just because I've got a stubborn old granddad who's got his notions about who I'm going to marry. Let's tell him now, Rick."

"We'd better wait till after Spargo's funeral."

"Wait!" she said scornfully. "That's all we've been doing. We should have got married the day you told me you loved me. Remember?"

He remembered all right. It was not something a man would forget. He had been riding along, watching the valley bellow the Bent R. Rawlins had been afraid Spargo would raid the Bent R, so he had stationed Rick on the rim and had kept Wildew at the house.

It had been just another late spring day until Nan had ridden out of the timber. Rick was not sure yet whether their meeting had been an accident, but anyhow it had been the first time he'd had a chance to see her alone.

He had been in love with her ever since he had been on the Bent R. He had considered it a hopeless love, the kind a man rides away from because the girl was as far out of his reach as the moon. But he had blurted out his feelings in almost incoherent words, and she had said simply, "You've been blind, Rick, or you'd have seen I felt the same way."

He said now, "Sure I remember. It was the biggest day of my life. All right, Nan, we'll go tell him if you want it that way."

She laughed shakily. "I'm not sure I want to hear what Grandpa's going to say, but we've got to do it."

They started toward the house, Rick holding her hand. This was not the kind of problem he knew how to meet. In a matter of force against force, he could handle it. But with something like this even Matt Wildew would be as helpless as he was.

As they reached the woodshed they heard a man ride up. Rick said, "Wait. Let's see who it is."

"Grant Jenner probably," she said. "He might as well hear it, too."

Still he hesitated, not wanting to talk in front of Jenner. He heard the man step up on the porch, heard him knock. A moment later Rawlins said, "Oh, it's you, Kinnear," in a fretful voice as if he wished it were anyone else.

JOE KINNEAR was the district attorney of Chinook County, a handsome, smooth-tongued man who made no secret of his political ambitions. Rick instinctively distrusted him as he did all lawyers, and Rawlins felt the same way.

"What does he want?" Nan whispered.

"Hard to tell," Rick answered.

But he thought he knew. Vance Spargo's killing was the biggest thing that had ever happened in Chinook County. He had been shot in the back, and Rick still had no idea who had pulled the trigger. It wasn't Wildew, for he would never kill a man that way.

Possibly it had been one of Grant Jenner's gunhands. He also had hired a pair, but Jenner would hardly order a killing. Either way, the law would suspect Lou Rawlins or his men as much as Jenner's bunch until there was definite evidence.

After a moment Rick heard Rawlins shout, "To hell with you! Get out of here!" And Kinnear shouted back, "Don't be a fool, Lou. You've got to deal with me."

"Stay here," Rick said to Nan, and ran around the house to the front door.

Lou Rawlins had brought the lamp from his office and had set it on the ancient pine table in the middle of the living room. He stood at one end of the table, a tall man with wiry white hair that was never in place five minutes after it was combed, and a square-cut beard that jutted forward from a wide chin. His eyes, once dark blue, had faded until they were almost colorless, and his face, weathered by wind and sun until it was as dark and grim as the rimrock that flanked the valley, was filled with a blind and unreasoning hatred.

Joe Kinnear stood with his back to the door, a tall, heavy-shouldered man who had been raised on a down-valley farm and had not let town life soften him. Neither Rawlins nor Kinnear was aware of Rick's presence when he stood in the doorway watching, not sure whether this called for interference or not.

Then Rawlins found his voice. He bawled, "Threaten me, will you? Why, you thieving, mealy-mouthed, walking law book, I'll bust you so flat you won't be able to turn a page!"

"You'll deal with me," Kinnear said in a low tone, "or you'll go to jail for killing Vance Spargo."

That was too much for Rawlins. He jumped at the lawyer, gnarled fists swinging wildly. Kinnear took one step forward and starting his right below his belt. He caught the old man squarely on the point of his chin and knocked him down.

Rick lunged forward then, grabbed Kinnear by the shoulder and swung him around. He hammered the lawyer on the nose with a jolting right; he felt the nose flatten under his fist and Kinnear went back, surprised and dazed. Rick was on him at once, giving him no chance to recover, nailing him with rights and lefts that rocked the man's head from one side to the other.

Kinnear was a heavier and stronger man than Rick. He lunged, taking another punch from Rick on the side of his head, but he got his hands on Rick. He smothered the gunman's punches, wrestling him back across the room, and brought a short sledging blow into Rick's stomach that sent a spasm of pain through him.

They stumbled over a chair and went down in a tangle of legs and arms, Rick hearing Nan's voice in a high, protracted scream. He jumped clear and regained his feet, backing away as he struggled for breath.

Kinnear came up slowly from the floor, a dribble of blood flowing from his nose. He grabbed up the chair, threw it, and lunged after it. Rick met Kinnear's rush with an impact that shook the pictures on the wall, and again he slashed Kinnear's blood-smeared face with a sledging right. Kinnear, caught off-balance, fell back against the wall and slid down to the floor.

II

FOR A MOMENT Kinnear lay where he had fallen, staring blankly at Rick as if not seeing him clearly. Then he dug inside his frock coat for a gun. Rick swung a foot, kicking Kinnear's wrist and sending the gun spinning across the floor. Kinnear grabbed Rick's foot and brought him down in a hard, loose-jointed fall.

When Kinnear lost his grip on Rick's foot, Rick went over the lawyer in a swift, catlike motion. He came again

to his feet before Kinnear could scramble up and reach him. Rick moved in and Kinnear retreated, head dropped forward on his big shoulders, arms up in a vain effort to protect himself.

Coldly and relentlessly, Rick pursued him backing him into the table. Rawlins grabbed the lamp and jumped away. The table went over with a crash.

Kinnear braced and held his ground, but Rick hammered his jaw with a brutal, driving right. Kinnear fell forward and clutched Rick with both arms, his face against Rick's chest, his knees giving under him, full weight on Rick.

Rick hit him on the side of the head, and again. Still the lawyer hung on, his knees rubbery. He brought his head upward, striking Rick's chin. Lights exploded across Rick's eyes and he went back, breaking free from Kinnear's grip. The lawyer lurched forward, hands outstretched, and Rick slammed a hard left to the man's jaw. Kinnear fell flat and lay motionless, his arms flung out.

"Quite a fight, kid," Wildew said from the front door. "For a man who's got a gun for sale."

Rick staggered across the room to a leather couch and sat down. The room spun crazily before his eyes, the floor buckling like the surface of a lake caught in a high wind. Nan ran to him, crying, "Rick, are you all right?"

"Sure," he muttered.

She dropped down beside him, a hand reaching for his. The room quit spinning.

Rick saw Wildew in the doorway, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth. Rick knew what he was thinking. He'd said over and over, "If you aim to make a living with your gun, never use your fists." It was one of the lessons Rick had not learned.

Rawlins set the table upright, and put the lamp on it. Kinnear was sitting up, his nose bent grotesquely, blood dripping from it.

Rawlins said, "Get him outside, Wildew. I'll kill him if he don't get out of here."

Shrugging, Wildew helped Kinnear to his feet. "You hear the man, mister? He aims to kill you if you don't slope out of here."

Kinnear knocked Wildew's hand from his arm. He staggered to the door and clutched the jamb, looking back at Rick, his face bruised and bloody.

Wildew laughed softly. "Looks like a piece of raw beef you're wearing for a face, lawyer."

Without a word, Kinnear went out. In a moment came the sound of hoofbeats.

Rawlins picked up the chair Kinnear had thrown at Rick and sat down on it. He said, "Thanks, Rick. No fool like an old fool. I wouldn't have lasted a minute with that hombre."

Wildew took Rick's right hand and felt of it, closing the fist and opening it, then did the same with his left. He said, "Got any hot water, Nan?"

"I think so," she answered. "There's a good fire in the kitchen."

Rick expected another lecture about fist fighting, but Wildew said nothing until Nan disappeared. Then tilting Rick's face up, he looked at it closely.

"You ain't got a mark, kid," he said, "except on your chin, and that's just a bruise."

"Butted me like a damned billy goat," Rick said.

WILDEW flipped away his cigarette stub and turned to Rawlins. "I reckon there's good lawyers and bad lawyers same as in anything else, but I figure Kinnear's a bad one."

"He's more'n bad!" Rawlins shouted. "He's a damned lying, ornery son!"

"Probably had a horse thief for a father and a sheepherder for a grandfather," Wildew said drily.

"No." Rawlins shook his head. "I know his folks. Hard-working farmers. Trouble was they saved their money and starved themselves to send him to school. He came back a lawyer and now he's got the county tucked into the palm

Lola cried, "Don't try it! I'll kill you if you do it!"

of his hand."

Wildew rolled a smoke. He said, "I heard Cord Graham would never have got elected sheriff if he wasn't Kinnear's man."

"You heard right," Rawlins said bitterly.

Nan came in with a pan of hot water and placed it beside Rick. Wildew said, "Soak your hands, kid. You may be needing your gun tomorrow. Kinnear left his iron here, but he'll find another one."

Rick put his hands into the water, grimacing. He said, "You had a fire in the stove all right, Nan."

"Won't do no good if it ain't hot." Wildew nodded at Rawlins. "It ain't my way to ask questions of the man I work for, but I am now, because me and the kid need to know. What started this ruckus with Kinnear?"

"He accused me of beefing Spargo," Rawlins said. "Claimed he'd throw me into the jug if I didn't make a deal. I jumped him and he knocked me down. Then Rick bought into the fracas."

"What kind of a deal did he want to make?"

The old man pulled at his beard, scowling. That was something he didn't want to talk about. Nan prompted him, "They need to know."

"Yeah, maybe they do," Rawlins said. "Well, Kinnear claims Lola Spargo—she's Vance's sister—will reach town on the night stage. The Hatchet goes to her. Kinnear says he aims to marry her. When she left the valley there was some talk about her wanting to get away from him. Spargo and Kinnear was purty thick. Anyhow, he allowed that if I paid him five thousand dollars, he'd see I didn't have no trouble."

"Hold-up," Wildew murmured.

"That's just what it was. Well, I ain't got five thousand dollars. I wouldn't have no truck with a deal like that anyhow."

"Looks like Kinnear aims to go into the ranching business by marrying the Spargo woman," Wildew said.

"That's it," Rawlins agreed. "But everybody knows that Spargo walked big for a gent who was next door to being broke. Prine Tebo holds a mortgage on everything Spargo owned. Lola won't get nothing out of it."

"You'll be bucking her if you aim to grab Hatchet range," Wildew said.

"She won't bother nobody," Rawlins said. "It's Tebo I've got to see."

Cattle prices had been low for several years. Neither Rawlins nor Jenner had much cash, and their herds were small. It would take money to expand and hold Hatchet range, and Prine Tebo, the Bald Rock banker, was the only man in the county who had that kind of money.

Rawlins rose and began pacing the floor. He said, "I didn't kill Spargo. Did you, Matt?"

"No," Wildew answered. "You know I didn't."

"Rick?"

"No," Rick answered.

"Damn it," Wildew said sharply, "anybody who knows me and the kid wouldn't think we done a job like that."

"Sure, sure," Rawlins said impatiently. "But you're both new on this range, and with Cord Graham eating out of Kinnear's hand, it may turn out kind of rough."

"I figured you'd be paying me and Rick off tomorrow after the burying," Wildew said.

"Didn't plan to. Probably need you more'n ever. Depends on what Tebo says."

Nan rose. "We're getting along all right, Grandpa. If Kinnear and Lola Spargo want to run the Hatchet, let 'em do it."

THE OLD man wheeled to face her. "Not by a damn sight. I had Hatchet range once. I was the first cowman on Pine River, way back when the mines around Canyon City was good. I fought Injuns and I organized the Vigilantes to fight rustlers. I lost out because times got hard. Had to pull back here with a shirttail-sized herd and three riders, and Spargo moves in. All right. I'm coming back!"

"Grandpa, I've got something to tell you."

"No hurry." Rick set aside the pan of water. "Plenty of time now."

"Work your hands," Wildew said.

Rick held up his hands, opening and closing them, and Wildew nodded, satisfied. "You're lucky, kid. Awful lucky."

Rawlins stood staring at Nan. "What were you going to tell me?"

Nan glanced at Rick. He shook his head, to tell her this was not the time. She brought her gaze to her grandfather, saying, "Nothing. It's just that now Spargo is dead I don't see any reason for trying to take his place."

"I'm not trying to take his place." Rawlins choked, his face red. "I'm trying to get back the place I used to have. One thing I aim to do before I die is to build the Bent R back to what it used to be. When you marry Grant Jenner you ain't going to him empty-handed."

"I won't go to him empty-handed or any other way!" the girl cried. "I'll

pick my own husband."

Rawlins glared at her, fighting his temper. He said finally, "We'll see—we'll see. I'll talk to Grant."

"I've thought of something, Lou," Wildew said. "I'm wondering if you have."

"You've thought of what?"

"Take a man like Spargo out of the picture," Wildew said, "and you leave a big hole. Maybe he was about broke, but he carried a lot of weight, tied up with Kinnear and Cord Graham like he was. Prine Tebo, too, probably. The town boys can't run a ranch, but they like to call the turn, because they're making money out of somebody else's hard work."

"What are you driving at?" Rawlins demanded.

"I'm saying if they put the Hatchet, the Bent R, and the Diamond J together, they'll have something that'll pay 'em big. When cattle prices come back this country'll be good again. Prine Tebo knows that?"

"You mean I ain't big enough to buck 'em?"

"I mean you and Jenner worked together because you had to on account of Spargo. Now suppose the town crowd picks Jenner?"

Rawlins' mouth sagged open, his face showing blank amazement.

Nan said, "You're talking loco, Wildew. Grant wouldn't play their game. He's Grandpa's friend."

"Sure," Wildew jeered, "and he's in love with you, which same don't prove he wouldn't take their bait if he thought it would make money for him, and maybe get his loop on you to boot."

Rawlins threw out a hand. "I'm paying you to fight, Matt. Don't try to do my thinking for me. I've knowed Grant Jenner since he was a kid."

"Think it over, Lou," Wildew murmured. "Trouble has been my business for a long time. I've learned you can't trust nobody when it comes to big money and a pretty girl." He walked out, leaving Rawlins frowning.

Rick said, "See you in the morning, Lou." He gave Nan a covert wink and left.

Funny how things worked, he thought, as he walked across the yard. You rode with a man for years. You fought beside him and you slept by the same campfire. You ate out of the same frying pan. With some men you'd share their dreams and you'd be bound together by ties of friendship. It was not that way with him and Matt Wildew. Rick doubted that Wildew understood what friendship meant, but he had a certain sense of honor and cold-blooded courage that Rick had never seen in another man. Still, Rick did not really know him.

WILDEW was sitting on his bunk when Rick came in. He said, "Sit down, kid. We've got some talking to do."

Rick pulled up a rawhide-bottom chair and sat down. He said, "Fire away," and drawing the makings from his pocket, rolled a smoke.

"You were a punk kid when I ran into you in Dodge City," Wildew said. "Seventeen. Too young to be smart and old enough to think you were hell on high red wheels. Remember?"

"Sure. You saved my life. I know I'm beholden to you."

He fired his cigarette, mentally recognizing the fact that there had been only one real reason for him sticking to Wildew. At first it had been hero worship. He had thought it wonderful to be picked up by the great Matt Wildew, but as he had matured, he had lost that overpowering awe.

In some ways Rick had come to dislike Wildew, although there had never been any hard words between them. Certainly his staying with the gunman had nothing to do with friendship. It boiled down to the fact that Wildew had saved his life. Until he had met Nan, he had not been able to forget that debt.

"It ain't just a case of being beholden." Wildew pulled off a boot.

"Whatever you owed me you've paid. It's a proposition of finding out how smart you are. You learned how to tote a gun and how to draw. You learned to shoot straight and you've got guts. But it ain't enough."

Rick canted his chair back and put his feet up on a bunk. He said, "I know, Matt. Like using my fists. All right, I lost my temper tonight. I wasn't packing my gun and when Kinnear knocked the old man down, I jumped in."

"You just jumped in," Wildew mimicked. "That's exactly what I mean. You're stupid. You gave Kinnear a hell of a beating, but you left him alive. Now he'll kill you if you don't kill him."

"Then I'll kill him."

"Not if he plugs you in the back, and that's the kind of huckleberry he is. Another thing. This falling in love. Hell's bells, Rick, you don't have to love a woman to have one. You can always buy 'em. Then you're done with 'em. You don't owe 'em nothing. Love balls your thinking up, and when a man can't think straight, he's done."

This was like Wildew, Rick thought angrily. A killing machine! Capable of neither love nor friendship. He said irritably, "Quit trying to make me into another Matt Wildew. I ain't built that way."

Wildew leaned back on the bunk, a small smile touching the corners of his mouth. "I found that out a long time ago. You've got a soft streak that's going to get you killed some day." He held up his long-fingered hands and stared at them. "I'm looking to my own future tonight, kid. Sooner or later age does that to a man. The years are one thing I can't lick."

III

IT WAS the first inkling Rick had ever had that Wildew even figured that age was catching up with him. He thought of the long hours Wildew spent practising his draw before a mirror, of the great care with which he put on his gun each morning so that the butt hung in exactly the right position, of his inordinate pride in his skill and reputation. If he loved anything, it was his gun.

Wildew dropped his hands. "I didn't really hanker to make that ride to Tucson. I've got a notion that this deal here can be made into one big enough to make us a stake. I sure as hell don't aim to be swamping out no saloon when I'm sixty, and I ain't riding for no thirty a month and found."

"I don't savvy. I don't see how we can save nothing big."

"It ain't a proposition of saving a dollar at a time. We'll get it in a big chunk, providing we don't let this ruckus die. It's my guess Kinnear and the banker have got something big up their sleeves, Kinnear anyhow. He figured on holding Lou up for five thousand. Now he knows damned well Lou didn't have it, so Lou would go to the banker. Maybe he's pulling the same deal with Jenner. That'd get Prine Tebo's hooks into both of 'em."

Rick rubbed out his cigarette. "Lou can't pay us nothing more than he is."

"The big money's on Kinnear's side," Wildew said softly.

Rick looked at him incredulously. "You switching?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Right now I want you to look at yourself. Lou will be done with you the minute you tell him you want to marry the girl. *You'll* have to switch."

"I'd never throw in with Kinnear," Rick said hotly.

"Might be other ways. I'm just saying you're holding a busted straight. Nan said she'd go with you if Lou won't stand for you getting married, didn't she?"

Rick nodded. "She will, too."

Wildew laughed scornfully. "You're crazy as hell, kid. She's got no kin but Lou. She'll stick with him in the windup, and you'll be left high and dry. Now are you going to let your heart flutter like a moon-eyed kid, or are we going

after the big *dinero?*"

It didn't add up, Rick thought, the gunman talking this way. It wasn't like Wildew, but Rick had not realized until tonight that Wildew knew he was nearing the end of his string. He was traveling on his reputation, and the time would come when his reputation wouldn't be enough.

Wildew said, "Kid, just remember one thing. In the pinch you can't trust anybody. You've got to look out for Number One."

Rick turned, his eyes on Wildew's tough, cynical face. Perhaps the man was right in saying he couldn't trust anybody. That would mean Matt Wildew, too.

"I guess I'll keep on like a moon-eyed kid," Rick said.

"All right." Wildew shrugged and yawned. "I reckon I'll go to bed." He was as cool as that.

With the lamp out, Rick lay on his bunk, realizing that for the first time in his life he had made a big decision, the kind that would shape all the remaining years of his life. It had been the right one. He was sure of that, yet he was scared. The fear lay like a piece of ice deep in his belly as he considered a future that had no place in it for Matt Wildew. . . .

Even as Rick lay listening to Wildew's snores, the south-bound stage for Bald Rock wheeled down out of the timber and took the narrow road cut out of the side of the rimrock above Pine River, hoofs and wheels clattering on the solid rock. The lurching of the big coach shook Lola Spargo with persistent torture. It had been dark for over an hour, but the stage had not slackened speed. Old Billy Cain up there on the high seat had the eyes of an owl, they said in Bald Rock. and he was unquestionably an artist with the silk and the lines.

It had been a long, tiring ride from The Dalles. Dust drifting in through the windows had covered Lola with a fine film from her little blue bonnet to her slim feet in the high, button shoes. She wondered if she would ever lose the taste of it.

THE CLIFF rose on one side of the road; the canyon dropped away to Lola's right into black nothingness. It was a familiar road, even though she had not been over it for more than a year. There was a river below her, muddy at this point because of the irrigation west of town, and huge boulders that years of weathering had brought down from the rim. And upstream she could make out the lights of Bald Rock.

Almost everyone would be asleep now. She and her brother Vance used to joke about how the folks in Bald Rock rolled the sidewalks up at nine o'clock. A combination cow and farmer town that dozed under the stars and moon by night, and a mild sun by day. Now she had a disturbing feeling that Bald Rock was going to wake up, since her brother's death.

At the bottom of the canyon the stage clattered across a bridge. The rimrock disappeared into night blackness as the valley widened. The fragrance of cut alfalfa was strong. It was a nice smell, one that Lola liked and had almost forgotten.

She hated The Dalles where she had worked in a store the past year. She hated the dust and the heat and the wind that howled up the Columbia. This was home, and she would not leave it again, not even for Joe Kinnear who would be waiting for her.

She wondered what it would be like now that Vance was dead. Folks would expect her to leave after the funeral Vance had written her what they'd said about her—too high-toned for the country. Probably there had been more, but Vance would ignore the gossip that had swept across the valley when she had been a girl. There would be some, she thought with a sudden rush of bitterness, who would remember it.

One other thing Vance had written about. No one could understand, in-

cluding him, why she refused to marry Joe Kinnear. Joe would be a congressman before they knew it. Governor, maybe. Or senator. But folks didn't know Joe. Not the way she did.

There was more pleasure in thinking about the earlier years than the later ones. Lola had worshipped Vance, ten years older than she was. Their folks had died when she was twelve. Vance had raised her, with the help of a housekeeper.

The Hatchet hadn't been much of an outfit then. Lou Rawlins had been the big man on the Pine River range, big and proddy and tough. Vance had hated him, and with the help of Joe Kinnear and hard times, Vance had cut Rawlins down to size. Now, she supposed, Rawlins would try to gain back what he had lost.

Then somehow Vance had changed. The last few years she had spent on the Hatchet had not been pleasant. Vance had always been greedy and too ambitious, but after he had taken up with Joe Kinnear, greed and ambition had grown out of all proportion until they dictated everything Vance did.

He had claimed he held a pat hand. To hell with the small fry. Old Lou had had his day. It was time for a younger man to take hold. With the law looking the other way, and with the bank to strangle life from the small ranchers by withholding credit, the Hatchet had moved up the river until it bordered the Bent R and the Diamond J.

More than once Lola had said to Vance, "We're big enough. We don't have to keep getting bigger." Then Vance would laugh his big laugh and say, "A man never gets big enough." Before I'm done I'll own half the county and while I'm doing it, I'll help old Joe get where he wants to go. Money makes the mare go and I sure aim to make her go."

Kinnear! Always Kinnear! It had been Joe this and Joe that. She had gone with Joe because that was what Vance wanted and she would have done anything for him—except marry Joe. That was why she had left. It was easier than having Vance urge her, "But he's big, Sis, and he's going to be bigger. You couldn't find a better man."

VANCE just hadn't understood. Joe Kinnear could do nothing wrong. She couldn't ever hate Vance, but she could hate Joe for making Vance what he had become. In that way Joe had been responsible for Vance's death.

When the stage reached Bald Rock it was nearly midnight, and the only lights along Main Street were in the hotel and the Stag Saloon. Billy Cain pulled up in front of the hotel. For a moment Lola thought Joe was not there. Then Billy Cain stepped down from the high seat, and Kinnear called from the darkness:

"Fetch a passenger, Billy?"

"Danged right I did," Billy said. "Purtiest girl in Oregon, so I gave her a ride she'll remember." He opened the door. "Ain't that right, Lola?"

"You certainly did, Billy," she said.

Billy got her valises out of the boot while she stood in the pool of lamplight falling from the hotel lobby across the walk, a tall woman smartly clad in a perfectly fitting gray suit. She could make out Kinnear's big body in the fringe of light. It was not like him to hang back, and she wondered about it.

"You're looking fine, Lola," Kinnear said. "You're prettier than when you left, and I didn't think that was possible."

"Thank you, Joe," she said.

Billy set her heavy valises on the walk. He said, "Funeral's in the morning, ain't it, Joe?"

"Ten o'clock," Kinnear answered. "We'd have had it today, weather being warm this way, but we held up on your account, Lola."

That was like Kinnear. Her year of absence had brought no change in him. He had a way of making it seem that somebody else was to blame if anything went wrong. Like this business of in-

timating that if she had been home where she belonged the funeral would not have been delayed.

Billy Cain said, "Well, anyway you're here in time for the funeral, Lola. That's what counts."

"That's right," she said, and picked up her valises.

"I'm sure sorry about Vance," Billy said awkwardly, and because he could not think of anything else to say, he climbed quickly back to the high seat and drove away.

"I'll take your bags, Lola," Kinnear said.

She set them down, preferring to let him have them than to starting an argument, and moved across the walk to the hotel. Glancing back, she saw that Kinnear had picked up her valises and was walking away as if he expected her to follow.

"Joe, I'm staying here," she called.

He turned back, his face indistinct in the shadows. "You're staying with me, Lola. I built a house for you. Remember?"

"I'm staying at the hotel," she said.

"You'll be more comfortable—" he began.

Whirling, she entered the lobby and crossed to the desk. The sleepy-eyed clerk stared at her with frank interest. He said, "Evening, Lola. We thought you'd be back for the funeral."

She signed the register, saying nothing. She had become accustomed to this kind of musculine interest before she had left the valley, but now it bothered her. There had always been an element of respect in the way men treated her because she was Vance's sister, but there had been something else, too, something she had not wanted to name that went back to the gossip that had been spread about her when she was a girl.

Tight-lipped, she signed her name and took the key, realizing she was afraid. Now that Vance was dead, the talk would begin again. She started up the stairs, not sure whether Kinnear would bring the valises or not. Vance used to say that Joe was one of the chosen few who had been kissed by destiny, that anything he did turned out right for him, and it was hopeless to hold out against him. Prine Tebo seemed to believe that. So did the sheriff, Cord Graham.

She reached the top of the stairs before she heard Kinnear cross the lobby. She went on along the hall to her room and opened the door before he caught up with her.

"I'll light the lamp." He put the valises down inside her room. "You must have bricks in those bags."

"Gold," she said.

The match flared in his hand and he touched the flame to the wick. He set the chimney into place and turned. "You'll need that gold," he said.

SHE SAW his face distinctly then and she stood rooted there, shocked by surprise. He looked as if a horse had kicked him. One eye was almost closed, his nose was bandaged, one side of his mouth was puffy, and there were cuts and bruises on his chin and cheeks.

"All right," he said testily. "I fell down a well. Let it go at that."

"You must have landed on your face," she said.

"Scraped all the way down," he said, and shut the door from the inside.

"I'm tired, Joe."

He made a savage motion with his hand to silence her. "I know you are. So am I. Tomorrow will be a big day for both of us, but we've got some talking to do."

"Nothing's changed."

"Damn it," he said harshly, "everything's changed, and you might as well know it. When a man as big as Vance is killed, the whole county's changed."

"We can talk tomorrow, Joe!" she cried. "It doesn't have to be tonight."

"Tonight."

He reached for her, and the old longing that she had seen so many times in his eyes was there again. She backed away.

"Don't touch me, Joe. I told you nothing had changed. I meant about you and me."

He dropped his hands to his sides, puzzled, and as if unable to understand why the woman he loved did not love him. Then anger was in him; his lips tightened and his wide jaw jutted forward the way she remembered it did when he was crossed.

"It was different when Vance was alive, Lola," he said. He shielded you. Now there's nobody to protect you except me. Seems mighty funny that a woman with your reputation wants to pretend she's hard to get."

She said, "Get out, Joe."

He shook his head. "Not yet. I aim to set you right on a few things. You're thinking you're coming back to a big cattle ranch. You'll just step into Vance's shoes and lord it over everybody. Well, you're wrong, Lola. The Hatchet is broke."

She sat down on the edge of the bed, her knees rubber. "I don't believe it," she said flatly.

"Go see Prine Tebo in the morning. He'll tell you. Vance was in debt over his ears. When he was alive, Prine played along because he knew Vance was a good cowman and he'd come out of it. Now it's different. Prine will close you out because he knows damned well you can't run the Hatchet. He can't do anything else because he's got his bank to think of."

"You're lying, Joe!" she cried. "Nobody ever questioned Vance's financial condition."

"I wish I was lying," he said. "Vance wanted to be too big too fast. Like I said, Prine played along with him, closing out the little ranchers along the river and selling to Vance. Trouble was Vance didn't have any cash. He gave Prine his notes."

"I'll have time to pay off," she said spiritedly.

"Those notes are due this fall." Kinnear shrugged. "Sure, you can move out to the Hatchet and stay for a month or two if it will make you any happier."

IV

KINNEAR stood there, broad-shouldered, formidable, looking down at Lola.

"There's one way out," he went on. "Prine's my friend. I can save the Hatchet for you and put in a ramrod in place of Curly Hale who'll run the ranch like Prine wants it run. I want you. You need me. That's fair, ain't it?"

"No. I'll never be so bad off I'll need you."

He pulled up a chair and sat down facing her. "I love you, Lola. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"You love yourself, Joe."

He nodded. "Sure I love myself, I'm proud of the record I've made, and I'm going a long way. Everybody in Chinook County will tell you the same thing. You don't love me." He spread his hands. "All right, I'll still take you. You know why?"

"No. I just want to go to bed."

"Go ahead," he said savagely, "but I'm not leaving until I tell you. I need to be in the cattle business because it will bring me votes. As the husband of the owner of the Hatchet, I'd get votes I'd never get as district attorney. I'm running for Congress next year. A good-looking wife is a political asset."

"Go away, Joe," she whispered. "Let me alone."

"I've fixed the house up for you," he said. "It's nice, Lola. And you'll go to Washington with me. Isn't that all a woman could want?"

"Everything but love, and don't lie about loving me." She stared at him, her hands clenched. "Joe, I hate you. You must know that."

He rose and kicked the chair across the room in a sudden burst of temper. "Why, damn it, why?"

"You killed Vance."

He stood motionless, his eyes on her. In them was something that shocked and frightened her. As he moved toward her a step, in that awful moment

she knew he was capable of killing her.

"I was Vance's best friend," he said in a low voice. "Why did you say that?"

"I don't know who pulled the trigger, but if it hadn't been for you, he would have been satisfied to have kept the Hatchet as it was. Then he wouldn't have been killed."

"I see," he said, relieved. "Lola, I had no way of knowing what would happen. I'm sorry he's dead, but I don't regret anything I did for him. I helped him and he helped me. It was a fair trade."

He began to pace the floor. "None of us know who killed Vance, although it's my guess Lou Rawlins did it. Cord Graham found Vance's body in the willows beside the river about a mile above the house. He had been shot in the back. But we'll get the killer and we'll hang him." He stopped and faced her. "But that isn't the question. You take me or you'll lose the Hatchet."

"Then I'll lose the Hatchet."

"Just one more thing. With Vance gone and you living out there alone, folks will remember something that hasn't been talked about lately."

"I should think," she said angrily, "you wouldn't want to marry a woman with my reputation."

"I want you. That's reason enough." He laughed shortly. "Anyhow, I'll make an honest woman out of you."

Without another word he left. She rushed to the door and locked it the instant it closed behind him and stood against it, trembling. She had thought she was coming home.

Now she wondered if it could ever be home.

She crossed the room and sat down on the bed, thinking of the time she had stayed overnight with one of the Hatchet's hands in a line cabin. It had been a simple case of necessity. A storm had caught her on Ghost Mountain. She had sought refuge in the cabin and the cowboy had come in after dark. It was a long way down a rough mountain trail to the Hatchet, and the storm had kept up until morning.

SHE HAD told Vance about it, laughing, and Vance had been shocked. Crazy, but Vance was that way, probably because he loved her so much, and had felt his responsibility to her so strongly.

Then the cowboy had got drunk and made some brags in Bald Rock. Vance had beaten the fellow half-dead and made him admit he was lying. The cowboy had left the country, but the talk had spread, the tale growing bigger with the spreading.

Maybe she had imagined it, but after that it had seemed to her that men began looking at her as if wondering about spending the night in a line cabin with her. It was worse with the women. They wanted to believe the gossip.

In time it had been forgotten. Vance was too big to have for an enemy, and Kinnear had begun taking her to dances and folks began saying they were engaged, a rumor she supposed Kinnear had started. Other men stayed away from her. She blamed that on Kinnear, too.

She undressed and, pouring water into the white, blue-rimmed bowl, she washed, but it seemed to her that the dust had worked through her skin. When she went to bed she could not sleep. She did not really believe that Kinnear had lied about the Hatchet's condition. She would see Prine Tebo tomorrow, but she had no hope that he would give her additional time.

She finally was dozing off when suddenly she came wide awake, her body tense, remembering the look on Kinnear's battered face when she had said he'd killed Vance. She was shocked by the suspicion that she had been literally right, although she had not meant it that way.

She knew then she wouldn't quit. She would play it out to the end. . . .

In the Bent R bunkhouse, Rick Malone woke with the insistent banging of the triangle in his ears, Nan's announcement that breakfast was ready. He got out of the bunk, his body stiff and sore.

Wildew was gone. It was still so early that Rick wondered why Nan had got breakfast at this hour.

He dressed quickly and, stepping out into the pale, cold morning, crossed the yard to the back porch. He washed, dried on the roller towel, and went into the kitchen. Rawlins and Wildew were at the table; Nan was frying flapjacks. She gave him a quick smile, and her lips formed the words, "I love you."

He started toward her, suddenly reckless, wanting to take her into his arms and defiantly tell old Lou how it was with them. She stood there, waiting, the first early sunlight touching her blonde hair with its torch.

Rawlins glanced up, asking, "How do you feel this morning, Rick?"

Rick stopped a step from Nan. Her smile faded and he saw disappointment in her face as she turned back to the stove. He went on to the table, angry at himself and uncertain why he had not done what he had wanted to do, except that he could not shake off an uneasy feeling that Wildew was right when he'd said that in the windup Nan would stay with her grandfather.

"I asked how you felt," Rawlins said irritably.

"Kind of stove up." Rick pulled back a chair and sat down. "Like a mule had kicked me in the stomach."

"My jaw hurts where that ornery son cracked me," Rawlins grumbled.

Wildew glanced impersonally at Rick. He said, "Wonder how Kinnear's going to explain his face this morning?"

"We'll be finding out before long," Rawlins said.

Nan brought a platter of flapjacks to the table. Rick helped himself and poured syrup on them, his uneasiness growing. He still did not understand Wildew, but he didn't believe Wildew was given to treachery. If he was going to switch to Kinnear, he'd tell Rawlins before he made the switch.

It was plain to Rick now that they had been wrong in thinking the trouble was over. Rawlins was too stubborn to back down. If he made his play for Hatchet range, he would need Rick and Wildew more than he had when Spargo had him backed into a corner.

WHEN Rawlins and Wildew had finished eating, Nan brought her plate and sat down across from Rick. Rawlins, leaning back in his chair, said, "We're stopping at the Diamond J and picking up Grant and his men. Then we'll go to town and see Tebo. I want you two boys to go with me, seeing that my own three hands are up in the hills with the cattle. We won't make no threats, but we'll let the old buzzard know it's my time to howl."

Wildew's impassive face told Rick nothing. Wildew said, "All right, Lou."

Rawlins rose. "Saddle up as soon as you're done, Rick. Hitch up the buggy for me and Nan."

"I'll ride," Nan said.

Rawlins shrugged as if it didn't matter. "I would, too, if my rheumatism wasn't giving me hell."

Funny about the old man, Rick thought. Everything about him was worn out except his spirit. He'd have this last fling at the glory and wealth he had lost; he'd have it or die trying, but he was making two mistakes. One was trusting Wildew, the other was thinking that Grant Jenner had any real core of courage.

"What's this Spargo woman like?" Rick asked.

"Pretty," Nan said.

"You know her?"

Nan glanced at him as if wondering why he asked. She said, "We weren't close friends, if that's what you mean. She's older than I am."

"Nan knew her well enough," Rawlins said irritably. "As well as I'd let her. Lola Spargo is a damned floozy, and if she hadn't been Vance's sister, she'd have been run out of the valley when she was a girl."

"It was just gossip," Nan said. "Any woman can get herself talked about."

"Not if she behaves," Rawlins snapped.

"Done eating, Rick?"

"Sure," Rick said, and rose.

Wildew followed Rick out of the kitchen. At the corrals Rick asked, "What are you going to do, Matt?"

Wildew gave him a cool stare. "Change your mind, kid?"

"No."

"Then it ain't none of your damned business what I aim to do. Not any. I've got one piece of advice. Have it out with Lou today, then get on your horse and drift."

"Why?"

"To save your hide, that's why." Wildew took his rope and walked into the corral. He paused there to look at Rick, a meaningless smile on his lips. "I said you had a soft spot, kid. Remember, I haven't."

"Meaning what?"

"You never in God's world could pull a gun on me, but I don't have no such handicap."

Rick let it drop there, wondering if Wildew was right. It had never entered his mind that the day might come when he would have to draw against the gunman, but the thought was there now, worrying him with nagging insistence. Only a hideous prank of fate would make him fight the man who had taught him everything he knew about guncraft. But Wildew was right on one thing. He would not be handicapped by sentiment if it came to a fight.

When the horses had been saddled and Rawlins' team hitched to his buggy, Rick said, "You've taught me more than just how to pull a gun, Matt. I mean, you've always had some principles."

Amused, Wildew said, "Keep talking, kid. It ain't often I hear about principles."

"Like shooting a man in the back."

Wildew nodded. "I never did, and that includes Vance Spargo. Don't reckon I ever will."

"And about keeping your word."

"I always have."

FACTS ABOUT LEADVILLE

DID you know that in 1860, when Abe Lee looked at a pan of dirt in Leadville, Colorado, he yelled, "I've got all California here in this here pan," and thus was named the famous California Gulch?

Did you know that at one time Leadville was to be called Boughtown? When the boom came and lumber was needed for the false front buildings and the lean-tos, the mountains were sacked for their beautiful pine trees.

Did you know that at one time Leadville was the best one-night theatrical stand in America and had an Opera House before Denver did?

Did you know that a husky stage-coach driver once said he'd "be goshdarned if he'd spit in the summertime for fear he couldn't get his mouth shut after he spit because of the thick dust in the road?"

Did you know there was no bank in Leadville at first and the gold dust was hidden in the miners' cabins? This method worked out satisfactorily, as there was always more gold to be mined. Robbers were unknown, for the miners carried a gun and each man was quick on the draw.

—*Edna Stewart*

V

NAN and Rawlins left the house, Nan wearing her Stetson, leather jacket, and brown riding skirt. Rick, watching her, was suddenly angry. No matter how this went, Nan would suffer, and he was the one who would hurt her because she would have to turn against him or her grandfather, the only two men in the world she loved.

"Damn you, Matt!" Rick breathed. "You can't switch on the old man like a doublecrossing Injun. Nan's going to need friends."

The enigmatic smile clung to Wildew's lips. "Falling in love clobbers a man's brains. I've told you that often enough."

Rawlins climbed into the buggy and took the lines. Rick helped Nan into her saddle, and she gave his hand a quick squeeze. Rick and Wildew mounted, and followed Rawlins out of the yard, Nan riding beside the buggy.

The sun was well up, the sky clear except for a few clouds that hung above the Cascades to the west. It would be warm again today, Rick thought, seeing the horses stirring the road dust into a white cloud that hung motionless in the windless air.

Long fields of hay on both sides of the river would have to be cut and stacked. That meant hiring farmers who were always glad of a few days' work, but if trouble still shadowed the upper valley, they wouldn't come.

That probably had not occurred to Rawlins. Or if it had, he was too stubborn to give it due consideration. He might give more thought to it if Prine Tebo turned him down this morning, although Rick wasn't even sure of that. Rawlins would bull it through, win, lose, or draw.

Rawlins swung off the road to reach the Diamond J. Jenner had hauled gravel from the river and was scattering it in a corral, another chore that needed to be done on the Bent R.

Rawlins called, "Grant!" in the peremptory tone he always used on his neighbor.

Jenner leaned his shovel against a corral post and came toward Rawlins, touching his hat to Nan, eyes lingering on her. He was a chunky man, thirty or more, with a round, pink face. He said cheerfully, "Morning folks," a broad grin on his lips.

"What the hell you working for this morning, Grant?" Rawlins demanded. "You know what day this is?"

Jenner cuffed back his Stetson. "Thursday, ain't it?"

"I don't mean what day of the week!" Rawlins shouted. "This is the day they plant Spargo."

Jenner kicked at a rock. "Lou, I didn't figure I'd go to his funeral. Damn it, when a man gives other men the trouble he did, I don't cotton to standing beside his grave and hearing the preacher tell what an amen, righteous son he was."

"I don't, neither," Rawlins snapped, "but I'm going to be in town, and I aim to tell Prine Tebo what we're fixing to do. Might be we can make a dicker with him."

Jenner chewed his lower lip, then he looked at Rawlins. "You want me to go?"

"Sure," Rawlins said. "Get on your horse and buckle on your gun. Where's your boys?"

"At the cow camp," Jenner answered, surprised. "Ain't yours?"

"I mean Fleming and Cardigan. We've got to show Tebo we mean business."

"Why, I let 'em go the day Spargo was shot. Hell, Lou, I can't afford a couple of gunslingers. When I hire a man, I want one who ain't afraid to get up off his rump long enough to work."

"That so?" Wildew asked softly.

Jenner stiffened. "No offense, friend. Lou can hire all the gunslingers he pleases."

Rawlins' face was stormy. "Grant, I'm surprised at you. We've always worked together. Now you turn your fighting

men off when we don't know how we stand with Tebo."

"I know how I stand," Jenner said. "I ain't looking for a kick in the teeth."

RAWLINS threw out a gnarled hand in a wide, inclusive gesture. "Grant, I've dreamed for years about throwing the Bent R and the Diamond J together. You know that. Now I aim to get the papers drawn up today. You coming?"

Again Jenner glanced at Nan. Rick wondered what was in the man's mind. Jenner had proposed to Nan so many times and been turned down that he must have known he had no chance. But he also knew Rawlins' stubbornness. Perhaps he was counting on that.

"I'll saddle up," Jenner said.

"Wait," Nan said, her voice low. "I'll make one thing clear to both of you. You can bargain over cows and horses, but you won't bargain over me."

"I never aimed to," Jenner said. "If Lou wants me to throw in with him, I ain't kicking."

Nan reined her horse around, calling, "Rick, come on. Let them haggle."

Rawlins bawled, "Nan, you ain't in no hurry!"

She didn't stop. Rick followed her, catching the grin on Wildew's face. The gunman might have been saying that Rick was even more stupid than he had thought.

When Rick came up alongside Nan, she flung at him, "We waited, Rick. What's it got us? I feel sorry for Grant, being dragged into a crazy deal he doesn't want. He's let Grandpa lead him around by the nose so long it's got to be a habit."

Rick stared ahead, wondering why he still could not shake off the feeling that Wildew was right when he'd said Nan would stick to her grandfather in the pinch.

Wildew thought about Nan in the cold, logical way he thought about everything. It was not possible for Rick to think about her that way. He wanted Nan so much that he could not consider the possibility of losing her.

She seemed strangely preoccupied now, as if unaware he was beside her. She was not much over eighteen, and Rick knew that even before she had been old enough to consider marriage, Lou Rawlins had started talking about Jenner being the right man for her.

The regular Bent R hands were older men who had worked for Rawlins as long as Nan could remember. It came to Rick now that he was probably the first young, single man who had been on the ranch since Nan had grown up. Maybe she had used him to declare her independence; maybe that was why she wanted to tell Rawlins about being in love with him.

Nan's saying she felt sorry for Jenner troubled Rick. If Rawlins quit trying to force them, she might think differently about Grant. She was a little too violent in her insistence that she disliked Jenner. Doubt began to plague Rick now for the first time since he had told Nan he loved her.

Impulsively he said, "We'll have it out with Lou tonight."

She glanced at him, frowning. "All right, Rick."

No smile was on her lips. She turned her eyes away to stare ahead. He could not help wondering if she was thinking about Jenner.

They passed several deserted ranches that belonged to the Hatchet, places Prine Tebo had closed out and sold to Spargo. Windows were broken, doors hanging from a single hinge, yards grown up with weeds. People had lived here; they had worked here and dreamed their dreams, and they had lost.

Spargo's death had not really changed anything. Lou Rawlins was fooling himself in believing that he did. Tebo could take the Hatchet, lock, stock, and barrel, and pick his own man to run it. If Rawlins kept on with the crazy idea he had, he would go broke and drag Jenner down with him. If he was smart, he'd let well enough alone. But no argument could sway Rawlins from playing

the fool in making this last, futile grab for glory.

THEY passed the Hatchet three miles above town. It lay a short distance from the road, the buildings surrounded by hay fields, rimrock rising directly behind them. Rick had never been in the house, a two-story frame structure painted white, but he had heard that Vance Spargo had furnished it well. The barns were big, the corrals forming a labyrinth to the west.

The talk was that cattle prices were on the upgrade again. If Spargo had lived, he could have cleared himself with the bank. It was strange that he had been killed just now, and it struck Rick that the killing certainly had been timed right for the banker. He frowned, considering the possibility that Tebo had been responsible for the killing, and decided against it. Like Grant Jenner, Tebo did not seem to be the kind.

"Think you'll enjoy running that big house?" Rick asked Nan.

"What ever made you ask that?"

"Lou wants to put you there."

She shrugged. "He won't. We might as well be reasonable, Rick. We both know what Tebo will say."

"Lou's gone loco," Rick said. "He's counting on Matt, and that's wrong. Likewise he's counting on Jenner and that's another mistake."

"You tell him, Rick," Nan said curtly.

"He won't believe me."

"He wouldn't believe me, either." She sighed, her face shadowed by worry. "He's never listened to anyone and he won't start now."

Again they rode in silence. The nagging doubts that had begun to plague Rick made him wonder if Nan really loved him. Even if she did he doubted if she really understood the decision she must make tonight. If she went with him, it would be leaving her grandfather to be defeated and broken alone. If she stayed, she would have to give Rick up. There was no middle ground.

It was after nine when they reached town. They reined up in front of the Mercantile, Nan saying, "I'm going to buy a dress. Take my horse to the stable, will you?"

Rick nodded. "What'll I tell Lou?"

"Tell him I'm going to spend the day with Mary Dolan."

She stepped down and Rick rode on along the street to the stable, leading her horse. Mary Dolan was Nan's best friend and Nan always visited Mary when she came to town. They would spend the afternoon working on Nan's dress. Rawlins wouldn't like it because he would want Nan to go to the bank with him, but it was one decision which he would have to accept.

Leaving the horses in the stable, Rick walked back up the street to the bank. There was a black bow on the door, and a notice that read:

CLOSED UNTIL NOON FOR
VANCE SPARGO'S FUNERAL

Rawlins wouldn't like this either, Rick thought, and waited there on the walk until the old man arrived, with Wildew and Jenner flanking his buggy.

Rawlins pulled up in front of the bank and stepped down. He asked brusquely, "Where's Nan?"

"Buying some goods in the store. She's going to spend the day with Mary Dolan."

"The hell!" Irritated, Rawlins pulled at his beard, glanced at the store, then shrugged. "Well, her and Mary will be up to their necks in pins and needles and thread till dark."

"The bank's closed for the funeral," Rick said.

Rawlins glanced at the door, then jerked his watch out of his pocket and looked at it. "Ain't time for the funeral yet. Prine's in the back room, chances are." He jerked his head at Jenner and Wildew who had dismounted and tied. "Come on. You, too, Rick."

Rawlins strode around the corner of the bank to the side door and tried the

knob. The door was locked. He moved to the window and looked in.

"Yeah, he's there." He tapped on the glass, shouting, "Open up, Prine!" and went back to the door.

The lock turned and the door opened. Tebo poked his head out, saying, "Sorry, Lou. I'll be open after dinner."

Rawlins said, "You're open now," and putting a shoulder against the door, shoved Tebo back and walked in.

BANKER TEBO was a slight, medium-tall man about Rawlins' age. He wore a carefully trimmed white mustache and had a pair of piercing black eyes that age had not dulled. Now they reflected the rising anger in him. He said, "You're riding high today, Lou."

He moved back to his desk and stood dourly staring at Rawlins. His office was not a large room, and when Rick, Wildew and Jenner pushed in behind Rawlins, it seemed crowded. Rawlins moved forward so that the desk was between him and the banker.

"Prine," he announced, "me and Grant are throwing our ranches together. We're taking over Hatchet range."

"I expected that." Tebo's thin lips formed a tight line across his pale-skinned face. "Forget it. The land along the river is deeded and belonged to Vance. It'll go to Lola now."

"I'll buy it."

"What with?"

"I want a loan. Spargo just held the title. You could have taken it over any time you wanted to. I'm asking for a big enough loan to buy the Hatchet herd. You're no cowman, Prine."

Tebo raised a hand and scratched his smoothy-shaven chin, eyes moving around the half-circle of men who faced him and coming back to Rawlins. "This a threat?"

"Call it that if you want to. I'm just telling you we're moving onto Hatchet range. I'm coming back, Prine, all the way."

"You'll never come back," Tebo snapped. "I'm not forgetting how it was, but what's past is past. Stay where you are."

"Damn it!" Rawlins bawled. "If I have to draw a picture for you, I'll draw it."

"No need to." Tebo glanced at the clock on the wall, then picked up his hat. "Time for the funeral."

"Do I get that loan?" Rawlins demanded. "Me and Grant, I mean?"

"No," Tebo said curtly, and walked out of the office into the morning sunlight.

VI

RICK, watching Lou Rawlins, thought it must be hell to be old. It was bad enough for a young man to see his dreams blow up before his eyes, but a young man had time to dream again. Lou Rawlins didn't. Now his shoulders sagged as if he lacked the strength to hold them erect.

"We're all right as long as that old buzzard ain't got his hooks into us," Grant Jenner said. "Let's go home and forget it."

Rawlins acted as if he hadn't heard. He stumbled out of the office and stood on the corner a moment, watching Tebo until the banker disappeared into the church. The organ had just begun to play.

Jenner laid a hand on Rawlins' arm, his cherubic face grave. He said, "No use bucking a stacked deck, Lou. It's Kinnear and Cord Graham, too, you know."

Strength seemed to flow back into Rawlins. His shoulders straightened and, as he rolled a cigarette, his fingers were steady. "A few years ago," he said, "I could have walked into that bank and got any amount of money I wanted. Well, I'll get it yet, Grant."

"It's no use," Jenner said.

Wildew glanced at Rick, and Rick felt irritation stir in him. A stake, the gunman had said, a big stake. He was like

a cat waiting for the fattest mouse to come by. Rick moved up beside Rawlins. He said, "Jenner's right, Lou."

Rawlins reared back, scowling. "You quitting?"

"No, but—"

Rawlins said ominously, "I still need your gun, and I need Matt's. If you and Matt are backing out, I want to know it. Now."

"Not me," Wildew murmured.

"I'll string along," Rick said.

Rawlins fired his cigarette, nodding at Jenner. "I wish you hadn't let Cardigan and Fleming go. Reckon they're still in town?"

"Don't know," Jenner answered.

"Maybe they're in the Stag. Let's go get a drink."

Rawlins stalked across to the saloon, Jenner beside him. The Diamond J man didn't like it, Rick thought, but habit would keep him in line for a while, habit and the hope that if he sided Rawlins Nan might love him. Perhaps she would, Rick thought, wondering why he had begun to doubt Nan's love for himself, when he had been so sure of it.

Rick followed Rawlins and Jenner reluctantly. He had neither respect for nor trust in Fleming and Cardigan. Wildew, too, had lingered behind. Now he fell into step with Rick, saying, "That old fool would sure be surprised if he knew what I'm thinking of this whole business."

Rick pushed through the batwings. Rawlins and Jenner were at the bar, and Rick saw Horseface Fleming and Deke Cardigan playing cards at a back table, Fleming big and ugly and with a long, broad-nosed face that gave him his name, Cardigan small and fine-featured and soft of voice.

Rawlins motioned, and Fleming and Cardigan came to the bar. No one else was in the saloon but the bartender. Rawlins said, "Whisky." Rick and Wildew had paused just inside the batwings, and in a sudden burst of temper Rawlins shouted at them, "Come on, come on! We're drinking."

Rick glanced questioningly at Wildew. One of the first things Wildew had pounded into Rick was that a gunman must choose between his trade and whisky. "If you want to slow up, whisky is the surest way to do it," Wildew often said. But this called for at least a beer. Wildew nodded, and they moved to the bar.

Rawlins swung to face Fleming. "You boys got anything on the string?"

The big man grinned. He was the talker, but Rick had always considered Cardigan the more dangerous. Neither Fleming nor Cardigan would be above shooting a man in the back, he thought, but they were not particular who they worked for. Other men besides Grant Jenner could have wanted Vance Spargo dead. And Jenner didn't seem to be the kind to order a killing.

"Well, can you talk?" Rawlins demanded in his short-tempered way.

"Never saw the day I couldn't." Fleming helped himself to a drink. "How about it, Deke? Have we got anything on the string?"

"Nothing good," Cardigan said.

"Grant's taking you back," Rawlins said.

FLEMING'S bushy brows lifted in surprise. "Now that's funny. Real funny. Grant told us purty damned plain that a man who drew our kind of money had better do some work. He even mentioned pitchforks." He looked down at his big hands. "We can't afford nothing like that. A pitchfork tightens up a man's muscles."

"The old job," Rawlins snapped. "We need you two, me and Grant."

Fleming pinned mocking eyes on Jenner. "That you talking, Jenner? Or just your future pappy-in-law?"

Rick stepped back from the bar, temper pulled to the breaking point. He would be doing Rawlins a favor, he thought, if he could break this deal up now.

"Let's have it, Horseface," he said,

powder-gray eyes fixed on Fleming's ugly face. "You want the job or not?"

Fleming looked past Rawlins at Rick, his tough face suddenly alive with interest. "It's the kid, Deke, talking up like a man."

"He is a man," Rawlins snapped. "You seen Kinnear's face today?"

"Yeah. Said he fell down a well. The kid do it?"

"He done it," Rawlins answered.

Fleming shrugged meaty shoulders. "Kinnear's one gent. I'm another. Now I never like to be prodded—"

"The kid's right." Wildew moved in front of Rick. "I don't figure we need you two. That ain't my sayso, but if you don't want the job, make it plain."

Fleming licked dry lips. Rick had seen this same thing happen many times. Even Horseface Fleming who never for a moment doubted his own toughness wanted no trouble with Matt Wildew.

"Why sure, Matt," Fleming said. "What do you say, Deke? We going back to the Diamond J?"

"No," Cardigan said in his soft voice. "We can do better."

"That's what I figure," Fleming said, and stalked back to his table with Cardigan following.

"Why, that smart-aleck son—" Rawlins began.

"Oh hell," Jenner said wearily. "Let's play a few hands, Lou."

Jenner picked up a bottle and glasses and moved to a table. Rawlins, glaring at Fleming and Cardigan, called to the barman, "Fetch us a new deck, Applejack." He nodded at Wildew. "Want to sit in?"

"Might as well," Wildew said.

Rick shook his head and moved to a window. The funeral procession was in the street. The bartender took the cards to Rawlins and came to stand beside Rick.

"Everybody in town but me went to the funeral," Applejack said in a sulky tone. "Here I am, waiting on a has been and a bunch of gunslingers."

"Why didn't you go?" Rick asked.

"Kinnear," Applejack said bitterly. "He's a hell of a man to work for. Should have locked up same as the bank and everything else, but not Kinnear."

Rick had not known that Kinnear owned the Stag, and now it struck him as queer that the lawyer had not closed the saloon, since he was supposed to have been Spargo's closest friend. He said, "Funny he didn't lock up."

"It ain't funny," Applejack muttered. "Big man, Joe is. Got big by doing tricks like this. He nurses every dollar he gets his hands on till it hatches another one."

The hack that followed the hearse was directly in front of the saloon now. Kinnear was driving, and a tall, handsome woman in black was beside him. Prine Tebo sat behind them.

"Who is she?" Rick asked.

"Lola Spargo. Vance's sister."

Other rigs wheeled by, townsmen and farmers from below town, and the Hatchet crew on horses, with the ramrod, Curly Hale, in the lead. With a bitter oath, Applejack yanked off his apron and threw it on the bar.

"I'm going," he said. "I don't give a damn if Kinnear fires me. Vance was a friend of mine."

HE PUT on his coat and left the saloon. Rick went outside and dropped down on the long bench, shadowed by the wooden awning. He rolled a cigarette and fired it. He took a few puffs and threw it into the street, finding the taste bitter to his tongue.

He was not sure why the dark mood was on him. Perhaps it was because he resented the way Wildew had stepped between him and Fleming. That had happened before and he had taken no offense. Wildew often said that there was no sense in having trouble unless you were paid for it, and he did have a talent for stopping trouble before it started. But he and Wildew owed nothing to each other now.

Time dragged out. Rick began to whittle on the bench that already held half a season's carvings on it and would be

nearly whittled up by the time cold weather came. He thought absently that Bald Rock, with Main Street now deserted except for him, was little different from a hundred towns where he and Wildew had tarried.

Dobes in the southwest, frame buildings here in the north. Or log ones. But essentially everything was the same. Horses standing hip-shot in the sun. Dogs dozing in the street dust. And always there was trouble or the promise of trouble. Wildew could smell it miles away.

Rick was tired of it, tired of Wildew, tired of everything he had learned about this business. It was not the life for Rick Malone, and he felt a keen regret for the wasted years. He knew now he had been growing tired of it for a long time. It had taken Nan to wake him up, to show him that life held the promise of many things he would never find if he stayed with Wildew.

At last the funeral was over. Rigs were streaming back from the cemetery, talk flowed along the street, and the dogs fled to the relative safety of the alleys. The hearse passed and turned off Main Street. The Hatchet crew rode by, somber-faced. Then Rick saw Kinnear's rig pull to a stop. Prine Tebo stepped down and held a hand up to assist Lola Spargo.

Rick saw Lola's face clearly now. She had been weeping. That was to be expected, but there was a genuine sadness in her that went deeper than the sorrow she must have felt for her brother. She had loved him, Rick thought, deeply and devotedly, and for some reason the knowledge shocked him.

He had placed Spargo and Kinnear in the same pigeon-hole of life, but there must have been some good in Vance Spargo if a woman like Lola could love him. Spargo and Kinnear could not have been much alike, for Rick was convinced that there was little if any good in Joe Kinnear.

Applejack strode past Rick and pushed through the batwings, his mouth hard set. Other men went into the saloon, and then Rick was aware that Fleming and Cardigan had come out and were standing on the board walk, idly watching the sudden burst of activity.

Rick's eyes were on Kinnear's bruised face, and he saw with satisfaction that the man's nose had been set and bandaged, that a corner of his mouth was still puffy and one eye half-closed.

Kinnear nodded as if in agreement with something Tebo had said and, turning his team, drove back up the street. Tebo talked to Lola for a moment, then swung away to the bank, and she walked toward the hotel, staring directly ahead of her, seeing no one. Her mind, Rick thought, was on her brother.

He wondered what she would try to do with the Hatchet. If anybody was trying to bluff with nothing better than a busted straight, it was Lola Spargo.

She had gone on beyond Fleming and Cardigan when Fleming's words, loud enough for her to hear, came clearly to Rick's ears, "There goes my kind of woman, Deke. They say a man can sleep with her for the asking."

Rick came up off the bench in a lunge. He grabbed the collar of Fleming's coat by the neck with his left hand and the slack seat of the man's pants with his right and swung the big man off his feet, taking him completely by surprise. He had Fleming across to the horse trough in front of the Stag before the man began to kick and bawl like a bull calf under a hot iron.

"Drop him, Malone," Cardigan called.

RICK didn't look back. He slammed Fleming onto the ground beside the trough. The man fell flat, spraddled out, and gave another bawl of humiliation and rage. As he got to his hands and knees Rick hit him across the back of the neck with a brutal, downswinging blow that struck with the power of a descending pick handle. Fleming went back down into the dust, almost knocked out.

Rick lifted Fleming, holding him by the coat collar and the seat of the pants

as he had before. This time Fleming had little capacity for resistance. Rick shoved the gunman's head into the slimy water that filled the horse trough and held it there.

A crowd had gathered, some of the men yelling for Rick to drown Fleming. Rick didn't know how many had heard what Fleming had said, but it was evident that he, himself, had few friends in the crowd. Rick yanked Fleming's head out of the water and shook him.

"Swallow what you said, Fleming," Rick said. "Tell 'em you're the damnedest liar in Chinook County, or I'll drown you as sure as there ain't no drinking water in hell!"

"Lemme go," Fleming choked. "Lemme get my gun and I'll—"

His head went back into the water. Rick held it there, with bubbles coming up around Fleming's ears, the big body bucking and twisting in Rick's grip. Then Cord Graham was beside Rick, a gun rammed into his back.

"Trying to drown a man, Malone?" the sheriff demanded.

Lou Rawlins was on the other side of Rick, shaking his arm. "Quit it, you fool! You ain't no good to me if they hang you."

Reason returned to Rick. He pulled Fleming back from the trough and slammed him onto his back. Water sloshed from the fellow's head and shoulders and trickled away through the dust.

"You made one mistake, Sheriff." Rick jabbed a finger at Fleming who lay motionless as he fought for breath, his eyes glassy. "He ain't a man."

"You're right about that," Graham admitted. "Fact is, we could do without the collection of polecats and coyotes that Lou and Grant fetched into this county last spring, and that includes you."

"Now maybe you could," Rick said.

Graham dug a toe into Fleming's ribs. "You take this up with your hardware, mister, and I'll have you both in the jug." He wheeled to Rawlins. "I want to see you and Grant in my office. Fetch Wildew and Malone along."

Graham strode away. Jenner, standing behind Rawlins, said in a low tone, "That took guts, Malone. I heard Fleming. You made some friends today."

"And some enemies," Wildew murmured.

Wildew had his right hand wrapped around his gun butt, eyes on Deke Cardigan. It was not until then that Rick remembered Cardigan had ordered him to let Fleming go. Wildew had kept Cardigan out of it.

"Thanks, Matt," Rick said. "I didn't expect it."

"Come on," Rawlins said irritably. "Let's see what the star toter wants."

Rawlins pushed through the circle of men, Jenner behind him. Wildew said, "He wanted us, too, Rick."

"Sure, sure," Rick said, and walked to where Cardigan stood, hate a naked and vicious thing in his eyes. "Any time you want to take this up, Deke, it'll be all right with me."

"I'll take it up," Cardigan said in his soft voice. "Don't make no mistake about it."

VII

THE crowd broke away to let Rick and Wildew through. When they had almost reached the jail, the gunman murmured, "I made a mistake calling you stupid, kid. You ain't smart enough to be stupid."

Rick said, "We ain't fooling each other, Matt. How come you put the hobbles on Cardigan?"

The enigmatic smile curled the corners of the gunman's mouth. "Habit, kid. But remember I told you you've got a soft spot that'll get you killed."

"I still wouldn't swap places with you," Rick said.

The sheriff's office was a small room in the front part of the county jail. There was a desk, a few rawhide-bottom chairs, and a gun rack beside the door that led to the cells. Graham stood at his

desk, long fingers tapping its spur-scarred top. He belonged to Rawlins' and Tebo's generation, a rawboned man with a sweeping gray mustache, stained by tobacco juice.

There was much of the early history of Chinook County that Rick had never heard, but he did know that Rawlins, Tebo, and Graham had been among the first settlers. Graham had been a cowhand on the Bent R when Rawlins had been the big man on Pine River and Tebo had been a struggling storekeeper, his stock a barrel of whisky, a few bolts of cloth, and some groceries.

Now just the three of them were left from the dozens of settlers who had come to Chinook County when it had been a part of Wasco County almost two generations before, and their positions had been reversed. Staring at Graham's craggy face, it occurred to Rick that this had a good deal to do with the hopeless urge to regain his prestige that constantly prodded Lou Rawlins.

"This won't take long," Graham said. "I'll give it to you straight. Vance Spargo was a friend of mine, which gives me more reason for finding his killer than that I'm packing the star. I'll find him and I'll hang him."

"If you're thinking any of us did it—" Jenner began.

"That's just what I'm thinking," Graham snapped. "Not you, Grant. You're a mite weak in the gizzard. That brings me to you, Lou."

Rawlins swelled like an infuriated game cock. "You're a fool, Cord, a damned, lame-brained fool. You'd never have got where you are if Joe Kinnear hadn't shoved you into office by the nape of your neck."

Graham's face reddened. "I'll let that go for now, Lou. I've been over the place where Vance was killed and one thing seems purty clear. There wasn't no fight. Vance had been talking to his killer, judging by the tracks, then he made the mistake of turning his back and he got it between the shoulder-blades."

"You're a little slow taking this up," Wildew said softly.

"I didn't figure the killer was going anywhere," Graham said. "He must have been a friend, a man Vance wasn't afraid of. Maybe somebody he didn't figure had the guts to do it. Otherwise he couldn't have turned his back."

"A friend," Rick said. "Ever think of Kinnear?"

Graham gave him a scornful look. "Joe was Vance's best friend and he aims to marry Vance's sister. Besides, he's the district attorney."

"There's Prine Tebo," Rick said. "And you."

"And his foreman, Curly Hale," Graham snorted. "Look, Malone. There was a time in this valley when men got beefed over nothing much. Some name-calling, maybe. Or a poker quarrel. Well, it takes a damned good reason nowadays to kill a man, and Lou's the only one I can think of who's got it."

It was a point that could not be discounted, although there was some doubt about Rawlins being the only one in the valley who had reason to kill Spargo. Others had suffered from the Hatchet's expansion. Still, the old man might have done it.

"Arrest me if that's what you're getting around to," Rawlins said sullenly, "but even a chuckle-headed idiot like you would know I wouldn't plug a man in the back."

"Not if you was the Lou Rawlins I used to know," Graham said, "but you've had some bad luck and it's made you loco."

"Arrest me," Rawlins repeated. "See if you can get a conviction."

GRAHAM shook his head. "Not today. I just wanted you to know you're under suspicion."

"Maybe if Lou decided not to make a try for Hatchet range," Rick said, "you wouldn't be so suspicious."

Graham hurried on, "It adds up pretty good, Lou talking to Prine like he done, and wanting to move in on the Hatchet."

"It adds up that way because you're doing the figuring. Maybe you don't know Kinnear came out to the Bent R last night and told Lou that if he'd dig up five thousand, he wouldn't have no trouble over Spargo's killing."

"Hogwash," Graham snapped. "Anybody else hear that proposition?"

"No."

Graham laughed shortly.

"How about you, Jenner?" Rick asked. "Did Kinnear make that offer to you?"

Jenner hesitated, then answered, "Yeah. The same deal."

"Now figure it out, Sheriff," Rick said. "Kinnear wants the Hatchet to have the valley from here on up to the head of the river. Or maybe Tebo wants it. Same thing. If Jenner and Lou got boogered into raising that five thousand, they'd have to mortgage their spreads to the bank. Then Tebo and Kinnear would have 'em where they want 'em."

"Takes more'n that kind of talk to smear honest men," Graham snapped.

"A man don't need to be here long," Rick went on, "to see how you and Tebo and Kinnear are hooked up. It's my guess that Spargo kicked over the traces about something and one of you three plugged him."

It seemed a dead center hit. Graham's face lost its color. He dug a plug of tobacco out of his pocket and bit off a chew with a savage twist. Then, making a show of anger," he said, "That talk won't get you nowhere." He nodded at Rawlins. "That's all, Lou. "I just wanted you to know."

"It's not quite all."

They turned to the door. Lola Spargo stood there, tall and straight-backed, her head held high.

Graham stammered, "This ain't none of your affair, Lola."

"You're wrong, Cord," she said evenly. "I've been listening, and I think Mr. Malone came nearer to the truth than he knew. I'm interested in seeing that my brother's killer is caught."

"He will be," Graham muttered.

"I came here for something else." Lola pinned her eyes on Rawlins. "I will not apologize for the wrong Vance did, and I never heard of you apologizing for anything you did when you were so high and mighty. The future is something else. Mr. Tebo told me you intend to take Hatchet Range. Don't try it, Rawlins, unless you want to bathe this valley in blood."

Whirling, Lola walked away, the staccato crack of her heels on the board walk slowly fading. Rawlins turned bitter old eyes on Graham. He said, "You ain't big enough for this job, Cord. Not unless you get up off your knees."

Rawlins stamped out, the others following, leaving Graham glowering at their backs.

Wildew said softly, "You handled that pretty well, kid, but do you know what you done?"

"I made another enemy," Rick said.

"What color do you like for a coffin?"

"I don't give a damn."

Rawlins called over his shoulder, "Let's put that feed bag on. Then we'll go see Prine again."

Rick, glancing sideward at Wildew's knife-edge face, decided that though he might be able to figure out what all the others concerned would do, that there would be no outguessing Matt Wildew.

If it were not for Nan, Rick knew he would get his horse and ride out of Pine Valley. He would be glad to be out of it. But there was Nan. For the first time in his life he was bound by a tie he could not break, not until she made her decision. . . .

AFTER NAN had decided on a piece of flowered organdie she had it cut and wrapped, and asked the storekeeper to charge it. He hesitated, and for a moment she thought he was going to refuse.

She could not have blamed him if he had, for she knew how much her grandfather owed and it was doubtful if he could pay this fall. He had borrowed from Tebo to pay gunmen's wages to Rick and Wildew, and he would keep on paying them. The storeman would be

thinking that if Lou could afford to hire gunhands, he could pay a bill that was long overdue.

The storekeeper said, "All right, Nan," and she walked out into the sharp sunlight, and around the corner to Mary Dolan's house. She hadn't really needed the dress. She had just wanted it. She could show off to Rick even if no one else saw it. Working on it with Mary might make talking easier. She had to talk, and Mary was the only one who would understand.

Nan heard the organ before she reached Mary's house and knew that the funeral had started. As she knocked on Mary's front door, the sound of the preacher's wife's soprano voice singing "In the Sweet By and By" came clearly to her.

Mary was working in her sewing room. Nan could hear her machine. She rapped again, louder, glancing at the tall letters on the window beside the door:

DRESSES MADE TO ORDER

She hoped that Mary wasn't tied up with an order from Mrs. Tebo. The banker's wife had kept Mary alive since she had moved to town and she could not afford to turn down one of her rush jobs.

Nan heard Mary's steps in the hall. The door opened. Mary cried, "Nan, I've been wondering what had happened to you!" and her smile was quick and genuine.

Mary Dolan was three years older than Nan, a fully matured woman who was too big in hips and breasts and just a little dowdy. She had no interest in men, for her husband had died the year before, and her grief was still as poignant as it was the day he had been buried.

Nan motioned toward the church down the street. "They've started."

Mary's smile fled, leaving her lips bitter. "Maybe I should go and dance on his coffin. That would give the old hens something to talk about, wouldn't it?"

"They've got enough now," Nan said, "and they'll have more."

She went in and Mary closed the door. Of all the people who had lost their homes along the river to the Hatchet, only Mary was left in the valley. But Mary possessed a stubborn streak that would not let her leave. After her husband had been killed and the bank had taken over her ranch, she had moved to town and started her business. It had always been some satisfaction to her that it was Mrs. Tebo who had made it possible for her to stay in Bald Rock.

Nan went along the hall to the sewing room in the back of the house. It was a small room, its double window facing the back yard with its big vegetable garden, the long lush rows without a single weed. Nan liked the room. It was sunny, filled with the smell of dress goods and usually cluttered with bright remnants. Nan dropped into a rocking chair, glancing at the sewing machine and dressmaker's dummy.

"You're busy?"

"Nothing pressing." Mary laughed. "The slave driver's giving a big party and wants this silk turned into a dress that will make her beautiful, but the party isn't till next week." She took the package from Nan and carried it to the cutting table. "Anyhow, I'm never too busy to work on something for you."

"Except that I wouldn't let you. I don't need a dress. I just wanted one."

"Doesn't every woman?" Mary snapped the string and swept the paper aside. "Why, it's lovely, Nan. You'll look good in this." She eyed Nan a moment, then asked bluntly, "Is it for Rick?"

"I guess so."

"Get a pattern?"

"No."

Mary rummaged in a drawer in the sewing machine and found several that she gave to Nan. "Take your choice."

Nan looked at them, rocking gently, and then glanced up. "Mary, I wanted to talk more than anything else. I've got myself into a corner."

"A woman never got into a corner she

couldn't get out of," Mary said. "I mean, if she's smart."

"I'm not that smart."

"I am." Mary's lips tightened. "I'm awful smart. You know, Nan, I used to think that it wouldn't take anything more than Spargo's funeral to make me happy. Seemed like there wasn't anything wrong with Chinook County that a good funeral wouldn't cure, but it's going to take more than Spargo's funeral to cure our troubles."

Rest in Pieces

"Humpty" Jones was as tough as whang leather,
There wasn't a fight that he couldn't weather,
Till he fought "The" Wild Bill,
And this fact is known still,
No one could put "Humpty" together.

—C. C. Coolidge

"There'll be some more."

"I've got a kettle of water on the stove. I'll make some tea."

VIII

MARY bustled into the kitchen. Nan went on rocking, idly studying the dress patterns. Presently Mary returned with cups, sugar, a pot of tea, and a plate of cookies.

"So you think there'll be more funerals." Mary poured the tea and set the cookies on the sewing machine within Mary's reach. "Who do you nominate for the guests of honor?"

"Joe Kinnear will do for one."

Mary nodded. "And Prine Tebo for another. I'd starve if it wasn't for what his wife gets out of him, but it would be worth it." She reached for a cooky. "Why pick on Joe, except that he was thicker than fleas with Spargo?"

Nan told her what had happened the night before. Then she said, "I feel like I was caught in a fast river and can't swim, Mary. You can't reason with Grandpa. I—I think he's gone kind of crazy."

"Drink your tea," Mary said, "and keep talking. You haven't got around yet to what's on your mind."

Nan stared at her cup. "How does it feel to be in love, Mary?"

"Well," Mary said, "I don't know. Kind of quivery inside. Wanting a man so bad you wake up at night dreaming about him. That was the way I felt about Hank before I married him. Seemed like I couldn't wait until we got the knot tied."

"I know," Nan murmured. "I felt that way. After Rick kissed me the first time." She drank her tea and put the cup on the sewing machine. "But after you're married. What's it like then?"

Mary clicked her tongue. "It's all you think it's going to be. If you get the right man. It was with me, but I guess it's different with some. Take our sanctimonious Mrs. Tebo. I get the notion that she sleeps with a rail between her and Prine."

Nan rose and walked to the window. "There would be no rail between me and Rick."

"No." Mary took a long breath. "But you might lose him. I never thought of that when I married Hank. I had three awfully good years with him, Nan. Then they brought him in with his head busted. I don't know yet whether he was really throwed from that horse. He could ride anything with hair and hide on it. Sometimes I think he was killed, but Cord Graham would never admit it."

"I'd be thankful for three good years," Nan said, her back to Mary.

"You think that now, but you get used to a man, feeling him with you and having him make you warm at nights when it's cold. You plan for him, cook for him and patch his clothes and—and everything. I'll never get used to being without Hank, Nan. I still wake up at night and put out a hand to see if he's there."

Nan turned. "I don't know what to do, Mary. It was different with you. Your folks had died and you had the ranch. I'm not saying I want Grandpa to die, but I know it won't work out the way things are now."

Mary rocked furiously. "Nan Rawlins, if you love Rick like you're letting on, you won't hold back on account of Lou."

Mary got up and put an arm around Nan. "The world's made for young people, honey. Lou's had his day to howl. He just won't realize that he's an old man and finished. If you love Rick and let him go, you'll hate yourself as long as you live."

"I've told Rick a dozen times that if Grandpa won't stand for us getting married, I'll go away with him. But I don't think I can when the time comes."

Mary dropped her arm. "Why not?"

"There's just me and Grandpa," Nan said tonelessly. "If I left him and something happened to him, I don't think I could ever forgive myself."

MARY walked back to the table and spread out the organdie, then she turned. "I'm not as smart as I was letting on, maybe, but I do believe one thing. If you have a chance to be happy, and throw it away, you'll never forgive yourself."

"I suppose not." Nan sighed and seemed to study a pattern. "There's Grant, too," she said. "He's so good. He'd do anything for me."

"That's not enough unless you love him," Mary said with asperity. "Not near enough."

"He's older than I am," Nan went on as if not hearing. "When I was a little girl he used to come over and I'd sit on his lap. He let me ride his horse and he made whistles for me. He even took me hunting for rabbits. It would please Grandpa if I married him. He's talking about putting the outfits together."

"Oh, for goodness sakes!" Mary cried. "Are you the one who will get married, or is it Lou?"

"Don't be foolish!"

"I'm not. Listen to me, Nan. You either love a man or you don't. The trouble with you, even where it's your own heart that is concerned, is that you've minded Lou so long you can't break the habit."

"I guess that's right." Nan drew a long breath.

"Here, let's get this dress cut out," Mary said. "You'll feel better when you're inside a new outfit. Hand me those pins."

Nan brought the pin holder from the sewing machine and laid it on the edge of the cutting table. She said, "I guess I don't know what I want. Maybe if Grandpa didn't shove Grant at me so hard, I'd like him. Like him enough to marry him maybe."

"You feather-brained little fool!" Mary breathed. "You let Rick make love to you and you tell him you love him, and now you say you don't know. You think maybe it's Grant!"

Nan dropped into the rocking chair, hands gripping its arms fiercely. "You think I'm not honest!" she cried. "But it isn't that I'm just feather-brained, Mary. I—I like for Rick to kiss me and I've been sure I'm in love with him. Now I'm all mixed up, Mary. I tell you I don't know!"

"But all the time you've known Lou would raise Cain when he found out about you and Rick. All right, Nan. Look at yourself carefully, then tell me whether you're honest. Maybe Rick just gave you an excuse to rebel against Lou?"

"I guess so," Nan said miserably. "I

got Rick to break up with Wildew and they'd been together for a long time. Tonight he's going to have it out with Grandpa. He thinks I'm going to leave the valley with him, but I know I just can't!"

Mary sniffed. "You didn't do Rick any hurt when you got him to break up with Wildew." She pinned a piece of pattern on the organdie and picked up the scissors. Then she laid them back down and look at Nan. "What happened that made you see the light like this all of a sudden?"

"I don't know. Not exactly. It just hit me when we stopped at the Diamond J on our way into town. Grandpa's bound to drag Grant down with him, and it's wrong. Grant would be all right if Grandpa would let him alone. I got to thinking about it on the way into town. It was the first time I ever thought that —that maybe it's Grant I'm in love with, after all."

"You're about as dependable as April weather," Mary said scornfully. "You just need to grow up."

"You don't know how I feel!" Nan cried. "Marriage is so awfully permanent."

"It ought to be," Mary said softly. "It ought to be."

"I guess you didn't have any trouble making up *your* mind."

"I didn't. It was Hank all the time. There never was any other man." Picking up the scissors, Mary whirled to the table and there was no sound for a moment but the steady whisper of the blades opening and closing on the cloth until she finished cutting the piece. Then she turned back to Nan. "I don't know Rick very well, but I do know he's not like Wildew. Or Fleming and Cardigan. You're going to hurt him, Nan. That isn't right."

"I know," Nan breathed. "I know. . . ."

AFTER one, when Rick and the others finished eating, Rawlins scooted back to his chair. He said. "We'll try Tebo again. Grant, hike over to Mary's place and get Nan. I don't want her riding back home alone."

"She aimed to spend the day there," Rick said.

"She'll come," Rawlins said. "Get her horse, Grant. We won't take long in the bank."

Nodding, Jenner rose. "I'll get the horse, but I ain't sure Nan will go."

"Then stay and ride back with her," Rawlins ordered.

Jenner walked out. Rawlins rolled a cigarette, his face grave. Wildew glanced at Rick, then looked at Rawlins. He said, his voice soft, "Let's get at it, Lou."

"Might as well." Rawlins grinned wryly. "I'm like a fellow with the toothache. Hurts like hell, but I don't hanker to see the dentist, neither."

He rose and they left the dining room. As they stepped outside the sun was not as bright as it had been earlier. Clouds had rolled up over the Cascades and spilled across the sky. The air was heavy with rain smell, and thunder made a distant, ominous rumble.

"We'll get a wetting before we get home," Rawlins said, as he turned toward the bank.

"Malone!"

Rick wheeled. It was Cardigan's voice, not soft now. He had thrown the name out like the crack of a blacksnake. Wildew said, "Get back, Lou."

"What the hell is going on?" Rawlins demanded.

"Get back, Lou," Wildew repeated.

Rick touched his Colt. It rode easily in the holster. He was cool. Wildew always said, "A lot of gun-fighting is in your head. Don't waste no time thinking about it. If you've got to pull a gun on a man, you'd better kill him, or you'll be hearing the devil talking to you."

"You want me, Deke?" Rick called.

Cardigan stood in front of the Stag, his thin body slack, face expressionless. One of his greatest assets was an almost feminine quality, for most men who faced him were inclined to underrate his

ability. But Rick had seen Cardigan draw.

"You didn't figure on leaving town alive, did you, Malone?" Cardigan said.

It was another trick of Cardigan's, talking and playing for time while his enemy's nerves tightened. He was an old hand at the game, and in one regard he was like Wildew—he was without fear or he appeared to be. The effect was the same.

"All right, Deke!" Rick moved around the hitch-pole and into the street.

The minute after Cardigan had first called the street had been deserted. Rick faced the man, the distance between them growing less with each easy stride Rick made. Cardigan stood motionless, waiting, right hand splayed above the butt of his gun.

There was no thought in Rick's mind now beyond this immediate job that must be done. All else was blotted out of his consciousness. His elbow was slightly bent.

One step, and the street was shadowed momentarily as the sun was covered by a black cloud. Street dust was stirred by Rick's boots. Another step. Still Cardigan stood motionless, eyes inexorably on the man he meant to kill. A third step, and someone coughed behind the batwings of the Stag, a sound loud in the pressing quiet.

Then Cardigan broke, hand whipping to gun butt, clutching and lifting the Colt from leather. Rick had been warned, a warning that others who did not live by the gun would have missed. Wildew called it the "fire glow in their eyes." Rick caught it in Cardigan's eyes and made his draw, forefinger on the trigger as the barrel cleared leather.

THE SHOTS were so close together that the sound of them rolled along the street as if they were one prolonged report. Rick felt the tug of a bullet as it slapped through his coat under his left arm. Cardigan went back under the hammering impact of Rick's slug.

Smoke hung above the street, then slowly faded as a breath of wind caught it, and the last echo of the shots died. The sun broke clear and in the sudden sharpening light Cardigan fell. Dust lifted from the street as his slack body sprawled headlong.

Rick stood there, looking down at Cardigan. His coolness was gone. Sweat broke out on his face. He licked dry lips and suddenly felt empty inside, terribly empty. It was always this way when he killed a man, and the thought was in him, "I had nothing against Cardigan. It should have been Kinnear. Or Fleming."

Men burst out of the buildings along the street and gathered around Cardigan's body, the doctor among them. They had been the audience in a grim drama, and now they were talking excitedly about what they had seen.

Rick wheeled toward Wildew and Rawlins who were standing at the corner of the hotel. Wildew's face was as impassive as if he'd had no interest in what had happened. Rick swung back to Cord Graham who was there, saying, "All right, boys, get him off the street."

"What about it, Sheriff?" Rick called, his gun still in his hand.

Graham stared at him.

"Hell, Cord," Curly Hale shouted, "he couldn't have done nothing else!"

Rick had not expected this from the Hatchet ramrod. Neither, apparently, had Graham. He snapped, "Shut your mouth, Curly!" He nodded at Rick. "I ain't holding you."

IX

HOLSTERING his gun, Rick walked to where Rawlins and Wildew stood. Rawlins was leaning against the hotel wall as though his knees were too weak to hold him. He said, "You're mighty damned cool."

"Not so cool," Rick said. "I'll dream about it tonight maybe."

"You're good," Rawlins said.

"I taught him," Wildew said. "We're both good."

Rawlins straightened and went on toward the bank. Rick followed, glancing at Wildew, and he thought Wildew just didn't give a damn. Another man might have said he'd been worried. But not Matt Wildew.

In the bank Prine Tebo, standing at the window, turned to them, admiration in his eyes. He said, "That was a good job, Malone. I know what happened a while ago between you and Fleming. I'm thanking you in case Lola never gets a chance to say it." Tebo pinned his eyes on Wildew. "A man like Malone could stay here and make a place for himself. You never will."

Wildew murmured, "I ain't worried none."

"I came back to ask about that loan," Rawlins cut in. "As a straight business proposition, Prine. You've got a lot of money invested in the Hatchet. Now you've got a woman trying to run the outfit. Where does that leave your investment?"

"Right where it was," Tebo snapped. "Don't think you can put on Vance's boots, Lou. Ten years ago you wore 'em, but you can't fill 'em now."

"If anybody knows the cattle business, it's me!" Rawlins shouted. "You hinting I don't?"

"No sense going over the ground again," Tebo said. "I ain't betting a nickel on you. And if you try to take an inch of Hatchet range, Graham will throw you into the jug!"

"You aiming to play along with Lola?" Rawlins demanded.

"My business," Tebo said curtly. "You owe the bank money now. All your credit will stand and then some."

Rawlins reared back, his beard thrust defiantly at Tebo. "You can't brush me off like I was a sheep tick."

"I am brushing you, Lou," Tebo said wearily. "Get out."

"Wait," Rick said. "Suppose Lou here is willing to give you a mortgage on everything he owns. For about five thousand?"

Tebo was puzzled. "It'd take a hell of a lot more than five thousand for Lou to get the Hatchet herd."

"Suppose Grant Jenner wanted the same amount?" Rick asked. "Maybe give you the same deal."

"You're doing a hell of a lot of supposing," Tebo grumbled. "I don't savvy what you're driving at."

"Last night Kinnear came out to the Bent R and said for five thousand he'd see that Lou wouldn't get into trouble over Spargo's killing. He had made the same proposition to Jenner."

Tebo brushed at his mustache, eyes moving to Rawlins and back to Rick. He said, "I hadn't heard about that, but it doesn't make any difference."

Wildew said, "We're wasting our wind, Lou."

Rawlins nodded and swung out of the bank. Tebo said, "Wait, Malone."

Rick asked, "Well?"

"I'm wondering about something," Tebo said. "I learned a long time ago that a banker had to judge a man's character as well as the collateral he had to offer when he asked for a loan. Lou's finished. You ought to be able to see that as well as I can. Just brooded over his bad luck so long he's loco. I don't give a damn about him, but I hate to see Jenner busted and there's Nan to think about, too."

Surprised, Rick wondered if he had been wrong in classing the banker with Kinnear and Cord Graham. He said, "Nothing will make Lou quit trying till he's dead."

"I know that. I just wanted to give you a piece of advice, Malone. Get out of it."

"I can't."

TEBO ran a hand through his hair, said irritably, "I hate to see a man fighting on the side that's wrong legally and morally, Malone. If you or Nan or maybe Jenner could get Lou to behave, there wouldn't be any trouble now that Spargo's dead."

"I take orders," Rick said. "I don't give 'em."

"Damn it, it's time you *were* giving some, then. I'll put it this way. You came here with Wildew. Somewhere or other Jenner picked up Fleming and Cardigan. Buzzards! Living off other men's troubles."

"I reckon that includes me."

"No!" Tebo shouted. "I figured so till I saw you handle Fleming. Now it's different. Maybe some of Wildew's cussedness has rubbed off on you, but you ain't hurt." He paused, lips tightening, then added, "Yet."

Rick stared at the banker's somber face, the conviction growing that he had misjudged the man. He said, "I can't quit my job now. Anyhow, you're blaming the wrong man for any trouble we're going to have. Kinnear's the huckleberry who's kicking up the dust."

Tebo turned away. "I'm sorry you think you've got to play your hand out with Lou."

Rick walked out of the bank. Rawlins and Wildew were waiting at their horses.

"What'd he want with you?" Rawlins demanded.

"He was hoping I could throw a rope on you," Rick said.

Rawlins laughed harshly. "Get your horse. We're riding."

"Malone!"

The hotel clerk was running across the street, waving an envelope at him. Rick stopped. "What's biting you?"

The clerk handed the envelope to him, smirking. "Miss Spargo said not to let you get out of town without giving you this."

"Thanks," Rick said, wondering.

He waited until the clerk walked away, then tore the envelope open and took out a single sheet of paper. There was one sentence written on it:

I want to talk to you in my hotel room—Number Twenty-two—on a matter of mutual interest.

This was as crazy as Tebo wanting to talk to him alone in the bank. It might turn out to be the same thing. Lola Spargo probably thought he could put hobbles on Lou Rawlins.

Wildew and Rawlins had mounted, and Rawlins shouted in his irritable voice, "You getting that horse of your'n, Rick?"

"Later," Rick said. "Don't wait for me."

Rick crossed the street to the hotel, leaving them staring after him.

As Rick paused in the hotel lobby he saw the clerk watching him and, recognizing the lecherous sense of expectancy that was in the man remembered there had been some gossip about Lola. He went on up the stairs.

Lola opened the door at once to his knock. She said, "Come in," and stepped aside.

"I got your note—"

"Come in," she repeated.

He walked into the room, not liking this and yet feeling that he should find out what she had in mind. She motioned toward a chair. She said, "Sit down, Mr. Malone."

She was wearing black and signs of grief were on her face, but still she retained a dignity of bearing and a beauty that would bring any man's eyes to her. Without conscious thought, Rick found himself comparing her to Nan. They were totally unlike. Nan was still a girl; Lola Spargo was a fully matured woman. A man would be lucky who had her love. Rick wondered why she had never married.

"Please, Mr. Malone," she said; "won't you sit down?"

HE SAT down as Lola took another chair. For a moment she studied him, her dark eyes thoughtful as if she were mentally measuring him. He shifted uneasily, hand reaching for the makings and then dropping away.

"I know what you're thinking, ma'am," he said. "You're right. Men like me and Matt Wildew can be bought if you want to foot the bill."

"I'm sorry." She colored. "I didn't mean to look at you that way, but—well, the thing I'm going to say is unusual."

She saw his uneasiness and said quickly, "Please smoke, Mr. Malone. I've often wished I could. Men seem to think so much better with cigarettes in their mouths."

HE ROLLED a smoke, grinning a little. "I guess that's right."

He rolled a smoke, grinning a little. "I guess that's right."

"First I want to thank you. I heard what that man said about me and I saw what you did. That's why I sent for you. You're not like your partner—Wildew. You're not like any other man I ever met."

He fished a match out of his vest pocket, frowning. "I don't savvy that. I'm just a gunslinger."

"No, you're not," she said warmly. "You did what you did because you had to, and not because you thought you'd get paid for it."

"Why, sure, but—"

She raised a hand, smiling. "It set you apart. Don't you see? You're—well, I guess the word is chivalrous."

He fired his cigarette, frowning. "Nobody ever called me that before."

"I wanted to say it. Now that I've got it out of the way, I'll get down to business. I'm in trouble and I need help." She rose and walked to the window. "I don't suppose you really knew Vance?" she asked.

"No."

"You know Joe Kinnear pretty well?"

"Well enough."

"Perhaps I'm prejudiced, but I believe he's to blame for whatever Vance did, and everything that's wrong with the valley. I hate to have to admit it, but I suppose my brother got worse during the year I was gone. I blame Kinnear for that, too."

Rick didn't agree with that. To his way of thinking, a man was what he was, and he had to bear the responsibility for his failings. But Rick didn't say it. It was natural for Lola to feel this way.

"I won't bother you about my past history or Vance's," she went on, "although I suppose you're prejudiced, too—against us. Rawlins naturally would give you only his side of it."

"I reckon," Rick agreed, still wonder-

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NOBODY'S NEUTRAL IN KANSAS

By

ROE RICHMOND

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ing just what she was getting at.

"I won't try to whitewash Vance, either," she said. "He was wrong, terribly wrong, and he hurt a lot of people. I don't know whether he was guilty of killing anyone, but he may have been. I do know the evil he did brought about his own killing. Perhaps there is a sort of justice to it. But then he was no worse than Lou Rawlins was at one time, and will be again if he has the chance."

"I won't argue about that."

She was watching him, smoothing her dress across her knees. "I can't prove it," she said in a low voice," but I have a feeling that Joe Kinnear hired that man Fleming to say what he did about me. Of course he had no idea you'd jump into it."

"What makes you think Kinnear had anything to do with it?"

SHE was silent a moment, her eyes on the floor. Then she forced herself to look at him again. She said, "People love to gossip. You've probably heard some about me."

"Nothing definite."

"But you've heard it. You see, Kinnear wants me to marry him, and he has the idea that I can be forced into it. That's his way, Mr. Malone. Gossip is one thing that none of us can fight, especially a woman."

"From what I hear Prine Tebo holds the top cards around here. You figure he dances to Kinnear's tune?"

"I did think so, but he was so kind this morning. Maybe I've been wrong about him. I'm going to see him this afternoon. That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I've got to fight. I just won't give up like Rawlins thinks and Kinnear hopes I will."

"Your brother stole most of what he had," Rick said bluntly. "With Tebo's help. You aim to keep it?"

"I aim to keep the Hatchet," she said. "I'd undo the wrongs Vance did if I could, but it's foolish to think I can go back and set everything right. I'll give Mary Dolan's place to her, but I can't bring her husband to life. Maybe he was killed. If he was, I'm afraid Vance did it." She spread her hands. "When he was alive, he wouldn't listen to me. Now it's too late."

She was honest. Rick's respect for her grew.

He nodded.

"No, you can't go back and live his life over for him."

"What I'm getting around to saying is that letting Lou Rawlins grab the Hatchet wouldn't help this country. Letting Kinnear go on running everybody's life is just as bad. You see, I've got something to fight for and not much chance of winning. I'll fight alone if I have to, but I need help. I'd like you to work for me."

X

SO THAT was it. Rick realized at once that what Lola proposed not only would set him against Rawlins, but it would build a wall between him and Nan.

Still, what Lola had said about Rawlins was right, and Rick knew the time was fast approaching when he would have to make a choice himself whether to stay on the Bent R and fight for something he did not believe in, or quit.

This would not worry Wildew; a few months ago it would not have bothered Rick, but now it did, and he was not sure why except that knowing Nan had given him so many different ideas.

"I can't," he said finally to Lola.

She leaned forward.

"I don't think you could fight for what you believed was wrong. Isn't that right?"

"I don't know," he said with sudden bitterness. "I mean, men like us don't do much thinking on them lines. Like Rawlins told Wildew last night he was paying him to fight, not to think. We just take orders."

"That's what's wrong with the valley!" she cried. "People just take orders, and keep right on letting Kinnear man-

age everything for his profit."

"I reckon your brother did."

"And I still say it's wrong. I don't claim to be unselfish about this. I need help and I'll pay for it. If it's money—"

He rose. "It ain't that. I just can't quit Lou now. Maybe he'll fire me." He grinned sourly. "If he does, it'd be a little different."

She got up and stood looking at him, her eyes almost level with his, and again he was impressed with the inherent honesty he sensed in her. And he had supposed she would be much like Vance Spargo had been!

"Rawlins won't fire you," she said. "I guess I'm just reaching for straws."

"I wish I could help you. Maybe later—"

"It'll have to be now. I know Joe too well to think he'll wait." She hesitated, then added, "There is one more thing. I can't get rid of a notion that Joe shot Vance. It's just a hunch, and I need help to prove it. I heard about the licking you gave him. He won't forget that."

"You're getting around to saying that we're on the same side whether we want to be or not. That it?"

She nodded.

"And Prine Tebo?"

"Maybe he's tied up with Kinnear so he can't get loose."

"What about your crew?"

"I don't know. I'll find out about that, too."

"Curly Hale?"

"He's the one man I can count on. He's ridden for the Hatchet for years and he thought a lot of Vance. He likes me, too, but he can't do much alone. It boils down to the fact that I'll have to raise money, and I haven't much time. Curly needs someone he respects to give him orders." She smiled, her head held high. "I was hoping you'd be the one."

She wouldn't beg. He liked that, and it seemed to him that here was the chance he had been looking for. He had broken with Wildew because of Nan, but the break would have come in time anyhow, for discontent had been growing in him. All that had been wrong with his past had now been brought into sharp focus.

He wheeled to the door. With a hand on the knob, he looked back. Lola's face was composed, masking her disappointment.

"I hope you win," he said.

"As it stands now," she said, "I don't have a chance. Fighting isn't a woman's job."

He went out, closing the door behind him. The last glimpse he had of her would stay with him, her head held in that high, proud way. As he went down the stairs, he felt the keen edge of regret. She possessed a rare kind of courage, and that stood high in Rick's standard of values.

IT WOULD be simple for her to surrender and marry Kinnear. She would have handed to her all that most people fought to acquire. Still, she was turning them down. He wondered what choice Nan would make if she faced such a decision.

The clerk was loitering in front of the desk when Rick reached the lobby. He glanced at Rick, grinning. "Quite a woman, ain't she, Malone? Quite a woman."

There was no mistaking his meaning. Rick hit him, knocking him sprawling against the desk. He pulled himself upright, filled with outrage.

"What'n hell did you do that for?" he shouted. "Everybody knows what she is. Don't tell me you ain't after what any man wants out of a woman."

Rick took a step toward him, wanting to hit him again. He stopped. He could not change the fellow's opinion, and he could not stop his tongue from wagging. He swung on his heel and left the lobby.

Within ten minutes Rick was on his way out of town, forgetting about Nan and Jenner until he was opposite the Hatchet buildings. He didn't turn back. Jenner would wait for Nan, and Rawlins and Wildew had gone on ahead.

He realized more fully than before that he must reach his own decision to-

night. He wondered if his love for Nan was enough to tie him to Lou Rawlins and his crazy, futile scheme, and knew it wasn't.

Nan would not understand that, but it was the thing he must do. He could only hope that when Nan made her choice, she would be able to see things his way. . . .

Back in the hotel room, Lola Spargo was doing some intensive thinking. She had not really expected Rick Malone to say anything different from what he had. Some men could shift their loyalty without effort, but Malone was not such a man, and she respected him for it. If Rawlins did fire him and he came to her, she was certain he would go through to the finish.

She moved to the window, smiling derisively at this wild hope. Rawlins would not fire a man like Rick Malone.

She had watched Rick leave town, riding easily as a man does who has spent much of his waking hours in the saddle. Just watching him sent a strange, warm glow through her. As long as she lived, she would never forget the terrifying prickle that had run down her spine when she had heard what Fleming said. She had wanted to run, to get away from the eyes of the men who had heard, men who probably regarded her the way that awful gunman did.

Then she had heard the commotion behind her. Impulsively she had looked back to see Malone handle Fleming in the hard, brutal way of a man who is no stranger to violence. She had fled into the hotel in panic.

A while later she had seen the gunfight between Malone and a man she did not know, and guessed it had come out of the trouble with Fleming. Rick had survived. She would always thank God for that. She would never have forgiven herself if he had died because of the impulsive gesture he had made for her.

Now, staring into the street again, it came to her that she would be safe from the kind of talk Fleming had made, at least within her hearing. She would be eternally grateful to Rick Malone. She shuddered to think that if he went on working for Rawlins, he'd end up in jail, or dead. Lou Rawlins was bound to lose. Prine Tebo had assured her of that.

Curly Hale was coming for her with a livery rig at four. He had sent the crew back to the cow camp, but she had to see Tebo again before leaving town.

She left her room, depressed. She knew now that she had pinned more hope on Malone than she had realized.

There were no customers in the bank when she entered. Prine Tebo was in his office. He was her one remaining hope, a slim one, for she could not count on him.

HE CALLED her in and held a chair for her. He sat down at his desk so that he could keep an eye on the bank. She dropped into the chair, folding her hands on her lap, eyes on Tebo's tight-lipped mouth, and the weight of failure was heavy. Kinnear was right. Tebo would not believe she could run the Hatchet as Vance had, even with Curly Hale's loyal help.

"You've had a hard day," Tebo said in a kindly voice. "You look tired."

"I couldn't sleep very well last night," she said.

He nodded gravely. "Of course. There doesn't seem to be any justice in Vance dying now with most of his life before him." He hesitated, then added, "But he wasn't the man he had been. I don't know what happened to him. He had enough to satisfy most men, but not Vance. Even threatened Rawlins and Jenner. If they hadn't brought in some gunfighters, I think he'd have raided their ranches."

Tebo knew what had been wrong with Vance, she thought, but she didn't say it, because it was the same thing that was wrong with him and with Cord Graham. Instead she said, "Gunfighters wouldn't have stopped Vance if he had really wanted to run Rawlins and Jenner out of the country."

Tebo shrugged. "You never can be

sure. We've got enough trouble without thinking of what might have been."

"You mean I have the trouble." She leaned forward. "I came in to find out how I stand. Joe told me last night that the Hatchet was in debt and you meant to close me out."

The banker flushed. He tapped the desk top with the tip of his fingers, a steady drumming sound that irritated Lola. Then he rose and began pacing around his office, hands deep in his pants pockets.

"Damn it, Lola," he said finally, "I'm in a pinch. I backed Vance because I believed he was the best cowman in the valley, and the little fellows between him and the Bent R had borrowed from the bank until they were in over their heads. I had to protect my bank. I knew that when times got better, Vance would pull out. The little fry never would."

"About Hank Dolan," she murmured. "Some say he was killed."

"Gossip," Tebo said savagely. "Been a lot of it about me and Vance. About Kinnear, too. Law enforcement isn't my business, but I'm convinced that Hank's death was not accidental."

Tebo's face was haggard. It surprised Lola. She had always regarded him as a cold-blooded banker with an eye on the easy dollar wherever he could find it. Now she sensed worry in him, and she wondered if what he and Vance had done was weighing heavily upon him.

"What about the Hatchet?" she asked.

He sat down in his swivel chair again and fumbled in his pocket for a cigar. He said, "Did you come back with any money?"

"About two hundred dollars," she said. "It was all I could save."

"Vance left less than five hundred in his checking account." Tebo bit off the ends of his cigar. "The Hatchet has no assets except land which is mortgaged for all it's worth, and cattle. Right now the market for cattle is bad. Might be better by fall, but chances are that will be too late to help you."

"How much do I owe?"

"I couldn't say offhand," he answered evasively, "but it's more than you can hope to raise. Vance was a plunger. It would have worked out all right if he'd lived. The bank inspector never questioned the loans I had made to Vance, but it's different now. I think you can see that."

"I'll pay you," she said in a low tone. "Some way. Maybe we could make an arrangement for you to buy back the other places Vance had and I could keep the home ranch."

Tebo shook his head. "It's all tied up together." He looked at her thoughtfully. "Lola, are you going to marry Joe?"

"I'll never marry him," she said evenly. "I think you know why."

"I can guess." Tebo rose, his cold cigar still in his mouth. "I don't want to hurt you, Lola, but I'm in a pinch and that's the truth."

AGAIN he began to pace around the the room, his face gray and old, and she could not help believing him. She asked, "Would it help if I could raise the interest?"

"If you could raise it all." He stopped, his eyes on her. "It didn't help you any when Rawlins started getting big notions. He hasn't got much chance of pulling off a big grab, but with these gunmen around, he could be mighty nasty. With things the way they are, I can't depend on a woman keeping Rawlins off Hatchet range."

"I can understand that," she said. "Who was the man that was killed out on the street?"

"Deke Cardigan." He walked back to the desk, looking intently at her. "You know what caused that fight?"

"I think so." Her hands were closed tightly; she felt sweat break through the skin of her palms, making them damp and clammy. This was the last thing she wanted to talk about, but she had to. "Has this gossip about me got anything to do with me keeping the Hatchet?"

"Not a bit." He shook his head, smil-

ing at her. "Lola, if I had a daughter, I'd want her to be like you."

She had not expected an answer like that, and she felt a sudden warmth rush through her. "Thank you, Mr. Tebo. It's been pretty hard, you know."

"Of course it has." He sat down again. "I know exactly what Joe Kinnear is. I'm going to talk honestly and depend on you not telling anyone what I've said. You would ruin me if you did."

"I'm not one to talk," she said. "I've been on the other end of it too long."

"My life hasn't been a happy one," he said abruptly. He chewed fiercely on his cigar, a finger tip making a series of ovals on his desk top. "I'm not complaining or asking for sympathy, but it's true. You know my wife. I wanted children and she didn't. Well, I found another woman. Joe knows about her. And what he knows would hurt both of us. I can't afford to let it get out." He looked up, suddenly defiant. "You won't understand this, but a man in my position is supposed to have a good reputation. Morally, I mean. You know what the old women of the valley would do if they got their tongues on me."

She nodded. "I *should* know."

"Well, that's what puts me in a corner," he said glumly. "Joe cracks the whip and I jump. He wants to run for Congress and he wants you so he can show you off as his wife. He wants the Hatchet, too. He looks a long ways ahead. Always has. Now he's reaching for the plums. He's been nursing the tree for a long time."

"I hate him!" she breathed. "Why does he think he can force me to marry him?"

"Because he has always forced other people to his will. It's the only thing he understands. Take me. Or Cord Graham. He uses any weapon he can find. He's got money. Last year he bought the bank so he'd know what went on."

XI

LOLA felt that Tebo wanted to help her. More than that, she was sure he hated Kinnear as much as she did. Because she was certain, she said, "We both want to be free of him. Isn't that right?"

The banker nodded. "I've been down on my knees to him so long I've got calluses on them. I think some day I'll kill him." He looked at her with brooding eyes. "I've talked too much. If you were to let this out—"

"I won't, Mr. Tebo. I'm worrying about myself and the Hatchet. There must be some way for us to work together."

He was an old and beaten man, and he made no effort to mask the misery that was in him. He said, "I have one small hope to offer, but it's so small I hesitate to mention it."

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"I was wondering about this man Malone. I saw him go into the hotel. Did you talk to him?"

She nodded. "I thought he might help me, but he won't quit Rawlins. Anyhow, just fighting won't help us, Mr. Tebo. What was your idea?"

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Hale will stick by you, but your crew can't be depended on as long as Kinnear is alive, and can pay them to walk out on you." He did not look at her. "They're building a railroad south from the Columbia. Construction men eat lots of beef. There's a long chance you could sell and deliver a small herd to them this fall before your interest is due."

"Kinnear will stop us."

"That's why you need a man like Malone. Suggest this to Hale as if it was your idea. If Kinnear found out I'd ever helped you, he'd ruin me."

Lola understood how much Tebo's fear of Kinnear had shaped his life. She said, "You're afraid of Joe, but Vance wasn't. I've been wondering if Vance rebelled against him and he shot him."

"I believe he did."

She remembered the look on Kinnear's face when she'd said he had killed Vance. The more she thought about it, the more she was convinced that that expression

had been an admission of guilt.

"Was there any trouble between them?" she asked.

"There was one thing which might have made trouble."

"What?"

"You."

She picked up her reticule, her lips trembling. She was sick with the thought that she might have been responsible for Vance's death. She said dully, "I guess I should have married Joe."

"And he was confident he could make you knuckle down. The harder it is for Joe to get something, the more he wants it."

She bowed her head, fighting back the tears. Suddenly she whirled and started away.

"Lola."

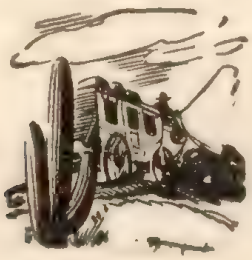
She turned back, her chin trembling. He said gently, "We'll lick him, Lola. Some way."

"It's wrong," she whispered. "So terribly wrong. We both think he killed Vance, but the law won't even look into it."

"Maybe not the law," Tebo said, "but he'll die. I'll kill him. Or you'll kill him. Or somebody will. He's like a wild animal in the timber who makes the others afraid of him. Sooner or later he'll be downed."

"But maybe not soon enough."

MASQUERADING DRIVER



AMONG stage drivers of the frontier West, none was more celebrated than Charlie Pankhurst. Hard-eyed, leathery jowled, and completely fearless of man or beast, the old tobacco-chewing muleskinner also was famed far and wide for a string of cuss words unmatched by any other driver on the road.

When circumstances so arranged themselves that Charlie could strike up a race with another stage, the impromptu contest assumed the importance of a Roman chariot race and wagers on the outcome ran high. Glorying in the affray, whooping, cursing, lashing the plunging animals, Charlie would thunder down the road in a smother of dust, coach bouncing from side to side like a chip in a whirlpool, and the safety of its passengers a thing forgotten.

As mounting years forced retirement from such strenuous pursuit, Charlie opened a small wayside tavern in California and began catering to the traveling public in less dynamic fashion. But the old stager had still to spring the most dynamic surprise of all.

Not until death claimed this famous wielder of the leather ribbons did even the closest friends of Charlie Pankhurst become aware that "he" was not the "he-man" they had assumed.

Charlie Pankhurst was a woman!

—Nell Murbarger

IT WAS almost four when Lola reached her hotel room. She packed the valise she had opened, leaving her coat out, for the storm would break in a few minutes. When she returned to the lobby, Curly

Hale was waiting for her, a livery rig in the street.

Hale put her valises behind the seat, stepped up beside her and took the lines from the whipstock. He said, "We're going to get wet."

They left town at a brisk pace, Hale glancing up at the sullen sky. Lightning ran across it in jagged bursts of fire, and thunder boomed at them. Then the first big drops hit them and Hale muttered, "Should have waited."

Lola glanced at him, thinking that here was one man whose loyalty she would never question, the one man Vance had kept, even though Kinnear must have wanted him out of the way. Hale was about fifty, a tall gangling man with the bowed legs and weather-scarred face of one who has spent most of his waking hours in the saddle.

"What chance have we got to save the Hatchet?" she asked him.

"None." He said it with grim finality.

She glanced at him again. It was raining hard now, drops running down his face and around the big mole on the end of his nose and some dripping off the end of his flowing yellow mustache. She felt the rain on her hair and face, and shivered, feeling a sudden chill.

"What can we do, Curly?"

"Don't know. Looks to me like Tebo's going to take the Hatchet, the damned money hound."

Slanting silver lances of rain blotted out the rimrock on both sides of the valley. Lola said nothing more until Hale swung into the lane that led to the Hatchet buildings. He pulled up in front of the house, saying, "Get inside." She jumped down and ran into the ranchhouse.

Hale brought her valises, asking as he came through the front door, "Your old room?"

"Of course."

He carried the valises upstairs, boots leaving muddy tracks on the floor and stairs. When he returned, he said, "Get them duds off. I'll start a fire."

She was soaked. Now she shivered, although the house had been closed all day and still held the heat of the warm morning. She walked around the living room, touching the oak table Vance had freighted from The Dalles years ago. She fingered through the pile of old papers and magazines and the mail order catalogues. She looked at the chairs and the black leather couch and the bear rug in front of the fireplace.

It was hard to believe she had been gone for more than a year. The room looked exactly as it had when she'd left, even to the guns hung across the antlers on the wall. She should be hearing Vance's great voice and hearty laugh. A chill ran down her back, thinking of her brother as he had been before he had known Joe Kinnear and let greed change him. But whatever Vance had done, this was her home, and she could not give it up.

She heard pine kindling snapping in the kitchen range. Hale tramped back into the living room. He shouted, "Hod dang it, get them wet clothes off! You trying to catch cold?"

"Curly, I'm going to save the Hatchet."

He shook his head. "You can't. Vance had a fool idea the sky was the limit. Even if the price of beef was up, you'd have a hard time paying the bank off."

"I'm going to save it," she said doggedly. "Some way. I talked to Tebo this afternoon. If we could raise the interest, he'll give us more time."

"And how are you going to do that?"

"Before I left The Dalles, I heard about a railroad that's being built south of the Columbia. I want you to go up there. They'll be buying beef from somebody to feed their construction crews. Might as well be Hatchet beef."

HE WIPED his mustache, looking at her uneasily as if he thought her proposal would be a fool's errand.

"Will you try?" she asked him.

He took off his Stetson and scratched his bald head. "All right," he said grudgingly. "I'll start tonight." He

walked to the door. "I've got to take that rig to town and I'll fetch some grub home. Not much in the pantry."

"It's still raining."

"I've been wet before," he said testily. "Now are you going to get them duds changed, or ain't you?"

"Right away," she said, and went up the stairs.

Her room was just as she had left it. Again she had the weird feeling that she had been gone but a few days. She stood at the window and watched Hale drive out of the yard and presently the silver curtain of rain blotted him from her sight. She shivered again, unable to shake off the feeling that soon she would hear Vance yell at her the way he used to, "I'm coming in, Sis. You decent?"

She had not been chilled enough to be cold, but she kept on shivering. She opened a bureau drawer and took out a maroon robe that Vance had given her the Christmas before she had left. She knotted the string around her and took down her hair, her gaze swinging around the room. There was the old familiar crack in the wall paper, the same lace spread over her bed, the leather-bottom rocking chair, even Joe Kinnear's picture on the bureau beside Vance's.

With a sudden rush of temper, she picked up Kinnear's picture and threw it into the hall. She went out and kicked it down the stairs. Returning to her room she sat down in front of the bureau and looked at herself in the mirror. Her hair hung down her back in a dark, stringy mass. She picked up her brush and ran it through her hair, then she stopped. A sense of loneliness gripped her and she began to cry. . . .

Rick Malone had almost reached the Dolan place just below Grant Jenner's Diamond J when he felt the first drop of rain. Thunder had been booming across the sky for half an hour and he knew he was going to be caught by the storm before he reached the Bent R. Then he heard the sharp crack of a rifle.

For an instant he thought the shot was another burst of thunder. He had not expected trouble, and he had been riding carelessly, his thoughts on Nan. Then he identified the sound and wheeled his horse off the road, cracking steel to him.

He heard the second bullet, a hornet-like *zing* close to the side of his head. The valley was narrow here, and as he plunged through the willows along the river, he realized that the rifleman must be on the rimrock to the south. He must have been waiting there, knowing Rick would ride by on his way home from town.

Pulling up in the shallow water at the edge of the stream, Rick yanked his Winchester from the boot and piled off his mount. The willows would not give him any real protection, but they would screen him so he couldn't be seen from the rim, and only a lucky bullet would tag him. He dropped belly flat on the gravel and wormed his way back into the willows until he could see through them. There he waited, eyes on the grim, flat line of the south rim.

There was no movement up there, no sound that reached Rick's ears except the hammering of big raindrops against the willow leaves around him. The first bullet had been wide, the second close, so close that there could be no doubt of the rifleman's deadly intentions. The fellow wasn't a good shot, but he had tried.

Rick's first thought was of Kinnear. He decided against the lawyer at once. He was by nature a careful and scheming man. He would be in town where he could establish an alibi. Fleming? Probably, Rick thought, though Fleming was a crack shot. Still, after Cardigan's failure, Fleming would have no stomach to face the man who had killed his partner, but he was not one to forget the horse trough treatment he had received.

THE rifleman opened up again, slugs coming in low and slapping through the willows. Rick scooted back toward the river and dug his face into the gravel. One bullet kicked up sand and small rocks to his left, the others were

wide. The marksman was spreading his shots, guessing what Rick had done and hoping for a lucky hit.

The firing stopped again. Rick crawled forward, studying the rimrock. The rain was coming down hard now, blurring the air so that the rim was indistinct. Rick could not catch the faintest trace of powdersmoke. The drygulcher probably was lying behind a boulder, or between two of them. Rick could stay here till sundown and not catch a glimpse of him.

Rick slipped back to the edge of the water and rose. Wildew was right in saying that it was stupid to leave an enemy alive. Too late now, Rick thought, as he slipped the Winchester into the boot and swung into saddle. He could either leave the country, or expect to be shot by a bushwhacker. It was not a pleasant choice.

Keeping inside the willows, he followed the edge of the water until he reached a shallow riffle and put his horse across it. By the time he reached the hay field along the river, the rain was coming down so hard that both rims were blotted from sight. Anger began to rise in him. He would hunt Fleming down and kill him. He would have to.

By the time he reached the Bent R he was soaked to the skin. The others had returned. The buggy was in the yard, Nan's and Wildew's horses in the corral, and Jenner's mount in front of the house. Rick put his own horse away and slogged through the mud to the back door, his temper drawn fine.

This was the first time in his life that he had been shot at from ambush. Wildew had always managed to call the turn, for he went on the premise that a man should stay out of trouble until it was time for the showdown. When that moment came, you kept your enemies in front of you and you killed them, or you stayed under cover until you could.

XII

ALL OF them were in the kitchen when Rick went in, the men sitting at the table, Nan standing beside the stove. Rick felt the welcome warmth from the fire and smelled the coffee. They eyed him for a moment, no one saying anything, then Nan asked in a low tone, "Coffee?"

"Sure." Rick pinned his eyes on Wildew. "Have your laugh, Matt. Somebody just tried to plug me from the rimrock."

Nan cried, "Oh!"

"Looks like he was a bad shot," Wildew said, grinning. "Who do you figure it was?"

"Fleming."

Wildew nodded. "Chances are you're right. You'd better go crawl under your bunk and stay there where you'll be safe."

"I'll have that coffee first," Rick said.

Nan poured it and handed the cup to him. She said, "They told me what happened in town."

"Fool stunt," Rawlins said ominously. "Now you've got Fleming gunning for you."

Wildew kept on grinning as if he found this amusing. Jenner, his face red, was staring at the floor. Nan was flustered and worried. Rawlins was angry, so angry that he was about to blow up and tongue-whip Rick for jumping Fleming.

Rick drank his coffee, and reached a decision that was long overdue. He said, "Lou, I can't go along on this range grab of yours, and I don't think Matt will. You can't pay us enough to get shot for a fool deal that you haven't got a chance to pull off."

It was too blunt, but Rick was in no mood to take the long way around. Rawlins got up and kicked his chair back vehemently, thrust his beard at Rick belligerently.

"I'll talk for myself, kid," Wildew said.

"And I'll do some talking!" Rawlins shouted. "When it gets down to cases, you leave me high and dry. You pull out with your tail between your legs like a damned, yellow-bellied—"

"Grandpa!" Nan cried. "Stop it!"

"You're talking wild, Lou," Jenner said. "There's nothing yellow about Malone. He showed that today and what he just said makes sense."

Rawlins wheeled on him. "I ain't asking for your put in. I aimed to get them papers drawn up today, but I forgot it, getting worked up over Tebo like I done, but I'll tell you what I did last spring when Spargo told us what we could expect. I had Kinnear draw up a will. I'm leaving the Bent R to you and Nan, share and share alike, and I expect you two to get married."

"Have you got to beat me down like you do other people, Grandpa?" Nan said in a low, bitter voice. "I told you I won't be haggled over like a—a heifer you'd sell."

Rawlins said, "I'm an old man, Grant. I want to leave the Bent R in good hands, and you've been more'n a neighbor to me. Don't walk out on me now."

Jenner rose, his face haggard. "You know how I feel about Nan, but I don't want her this way."

"She'll come around," Rawlins said brusquely. "We'll go to town tomorrow and draw up them pardnership papers. I've been thinking we don't have to have Tebo's backing, and we don't need money to buy more cattle. We'll take Hatchett range regardless. Lola can't do nothing. What's more, if I've got that Hatchet crew sized up right, they won't do no fighting."

"What are you figuring on now?" Jenner asked in a ragged voice.

"What I should have done today without running into town and begging for a loan from that damned Tebo. We'll go to the cow camp in the morning, you'n me and Wildew. That'll make nine of us with our boys. We'll round up our steers. Nobody'll bother the cows and calves for a few days. We'll drive the steers onto Hatchet range. I'm betting my bottom dollar that the first cap we crack will send every Hatchet man in the outfit running over the hill so fast we won't see nothing but dust."

RICK stared at the old man, convinced that Cord Graham had been right. Rawlins' bad luck had made him loco. He had made up his mind and he'd go on to the bitter end, unable to see that he could do nothing but bring injury and defeat and heart-break to those who loved him.

"I don't know—" Jenner began.

"I do," Rawlins snapped. "By fall you'll see I'm right. Tebo's got to have somebody on the Hatchet who knows cattle. Once he sees we mean business, he'll come around."

"You're an old fool," Rick said. "Likewise you're a stubborn mule-head who can't see past the end of your nose."

Rawlins swung to face him, his weathered face red with the sudden rage that burned through him. "Get out! Pack your war bag and get the hell off the Bent R. You're fired."

"You're too late. I fired myself a while ago, but there's one thing you don't know." Rick put an arm around Nan. "Nan and me are going to get married. If you want her, you've got to take me. I'll work, Lou, if you quit this crazy scheming. I'm done hiring out my gun."

Rawlins' mouth sagged open. He looked at Nan, expecting a denial. He blurted, "It ain't true. You're all I've got, Nan, just you and Grant. Tell me it ain't true."

She stood beside Rick, her slim body tense, her face pale. "I've got a right to make up my own mind, Grandpa. Seems like you just can't understand that."

"You don't have to throw your life away on a gunslinger." Rawlins took a step toward her. "You've got no kin but me, Nan, and you're all I've got. Everything I've done is —"

"You never think about me having any feelings," she whispered. "It—it's been that way as long as I can remember."

He came to her, ignoring Rick, and took her. There were tears in his eyes. This had shocked him as nothing else

could have done. If Nan walked out, there would be no reason for him to keep on living. For the first time Rick realized that the old man's fantastic desire to bring the Bent R back to its former glory was prompted by his love for Nan as much as his desire of wealth and power.

"Nan," Rawlins said in a low, begging voice. "Nan, honey, don't leave me. I couldn't stand it."

She looked up at Rick. "I can't go with you, Rick. Don't you see?"

He stepped back from her. He felt no anger. Just hurt, the kind of hurt he could not describe. An ache, a dull, pressing ache that made it hard to breathe. He thought, "She doesn't know what she's doing. In the pinch there's nobody but him."

"You promised," he said in a low tone. "You said that if he wouldn't put up with me, you'd go away."

"But can't you see, Rick?" she cried.

"I just see one thing. You're turning me down."

She lowered her gaze. "It'll be different when this is all over."

"It'll never be different," he said bitterly. "You love me or you don't."

"I don't love you enough to break his heart," she said.

"You were just having a little fun with me. That it?"

"If you won't even try to understand how I feel," she flared, "I guess you don't love me much."

He was not really surprised. Since morning the feeling had grown in him that it would go this way. Without a word he wheeled out of the kitchen and crossed to the bunkhouse. He told himself he'd never love another woman. Wildew had been right about her. Maybe he had been right about buying a woman when he wanted one.

It did not take long to pack his war bag. He had been here a few months, as long as he had stayed anywhere since he had started traveling with Wildew. It had been a home of sorts, as much of a home as he had known since he was fourteen and had started drifting. But it had turned out to be just another job.

LIKE an ordinary cowhand, Rick's "thirty years' gatherin's" could be packed into a flour sack. A hair rope he had been pleating, some whang leather, a needle and thread, an extra pair of spurs, shaving gear, and a few other odds and ends. He rolled the flour sack up in his tarpaulin along with his soogans and the clothes he wasn't wearing, and carried it to the corral.

The storm was over, the clouds rolling on toward the Blue Mountains, and most of the sky was clear, with the sun well down to the west. There was a moist, washed smell in the air, and steam was rising from a soaked earth. By the time Rick had saddled and tied his bedroll on his extra horse, Wildew had come to the corral, a cigarette dangling from his mouth.

"So you've decided to change your bedding around," Wildew said with lazy indolence.

"I didn't decide it," Rick said darkly. "It was decided for me. Rub it in, Matt. Go ahead. Rub it in."

Wildew laughed. "I thought you knew me better'n that."

Rick stood beside his saddle horse, looking at Wildew. It was as if these six years had never been. Matt Wildew was a stranger, a slender, pale-eyed stranger with the face of a killer. At that moment Rick felt neither affection nor dislike for the man.

"I don't know you," Rick said. "I don't know you at all."

Wildew shrugged. "Right now you've been hit a purty hard lick and you're out of your head. Tomorrow it'll be different. Where you headed?"

Rick hadn't thought about that. He'd just wanted to get off the Bent R. Now he remembered the job Lola Spargo had offered him, a good job that gave him something to fight for that he could believe in. He had told Lola that if Rawlins fired him, it would be different. Well, he'd been fired.

"I'll be on the Hatchet."

It was seldom that Wildew showed any surprise, but he did now. He looked sharply at Rick, then murmured, "Well, I'll be damned. And Kinnear ain't going to cotton to your hanging around his girl."

"Didn't figure he would. I reckon that's why I'm going to the Hatchet. I've got a few things to settle before I leave this range."

Wildew flipped his cigarette away. "I didn't figure you'd run, but fighting ought to pay a man."

"I'll get paid."

"You saw the Spargo woman before you left town?"

Rick nodded. "She thinks Kinnear killed her brother."

"Well now, that makes everything fine." Wildew shook his head. "Don't go off half-cocked, kid. I still say there's a big deal here. I ain't sure yet just how to work it, but I'll get my teeth into it before I'm done."

Rick mounted. "Just one thing, Matt. I'll take care of Fleming and Kinnear when the sign's right. Lola figures Kinnear put Fleming up to saying what he did about her. Might have, too."

Cagy now, Wildew said, "That don't make sense."

Rick said, "Maybe it don't. I was going to say something else. Nan still needs a friend. You're here. I ain't. Don't sell her out."

"Don't make the mistake of trying to give me orders," Wildew murmured. "You should know that, too."

"I'm giving you that one," Rick said sharply. "You sell Nan out and I'll beat some teeth down your throat."

"Not me you won't." Wildew raised a hand in mock salute, grinning. "So long, Stupid."

Rick rode out of the yard, not looking back. Stupid! Well, maybe he was. Maybe any man was stupid who let a woman kick him around as Nan had. She'd cut his heart out and played catch with it. It wouldn't happen again. Then he wondered if Nan was watching him ride away. Probably not. She hadn't cared one way or the other.

He stayed on the north side of the river until he was past the Dolan place. It was not likely that Fleming was still up there on the rim, but the old wariness was in him now. He must not forget for a moment that danger was a constant presence, not if he wanted to live. That was funny. He still wanted to live. Nan's perfidy had not changed that.

IT WAS dusk when he reached the Hatchet. He dismounted in front of the house, noticing the saddled horse tied to the hitch-rack. He wondered about it as he walked up the muddy path. He carefully scraped his boots on the steps, and knocked.

Curly Hale opened the door, scowling when he saw who it was. He said curtly, "Rawlins' gunslingers ain't welcome here. Vamose."

"I ain't working for Rawlins," Rick said. "I want to see Miss Spargo."

"She ain't home to you," Hale growled. "I told you to git."

Lola pushed past Hale who tried to block the doorway, and her voice was warmly eager when she asked, "Did you say you weren't working for Rawlins?"

She was wearing a maroon robe and slippers. Her dark hair hung down her back, loosely tied at the back of her neck with a small red ribbon. He looked at her, feeling her vibrant personality and appreciating her mature beauty, and it struck him with stunning impact that such thoughts should not be in the mind of a man who had just been sent away by the girl to whom he had considered himself engaged.

"That's right," Rick said. "I came to take the job you offered me this afternoon if it's still open."

"Job?" Hale bawled. "Now that's the damnedest thing I ever heard. Mister, you ain't getting no job on the Hatchet."

"The Hatchet may not belong to me much longer," Lola said sharply, "but

it does now and I'm still giving the orders. Get out of the way so he can come in."

Hale stared at Lola. "You don't know nothing about this hairpin."

"I'm not inquiring about his past history," Lola said coldly. "I'm judging him by what he did in town. He's hired. I don't know what he expects for wages, but whatever it is, he'll get it."

Hale stepped back into the room, big hands fisted. "What kind of a job do you figure to put him at?"

"Fighting. That's his trade and it's a job I'm going to need someone for."

Hale threw out a hand in savage protest. "I've stood by the Hatchet when Vance done things I didn't like. He fired our old hands and took on a tough crew because Kinnear talked him into it, but they was cowhands. Malone's a gunslinger. I don't reckon he ever done a day's work in his life."

"I'm not one to make trouble," Rick said. "If I ain't welcome—"

"You're more than welcome," Lola cut in. "What's more, you're needed. Curly, you aren't thinking straight. You'll be gone a day, maybe more. Now what will happen if you make the deal?"

"We'll round up as many steers as they'll take and we'll get 'em on the trail. Why?"

"And Joe Kinnear will have a fit when he finds out what's up. Are you big enough to keep your crew in line when Kinnear tells them not to move any stock?"

Hale's face was stormy, but her question brought a problem to his mind that apparently had not been there before. He backed away, scowling.

"You figure Malone can whip 'em into line?" Hale asked.

"You know your men," Lola said curtly. "You can answer that question better than I can. If they don't work, you'll have to hire another crew. Joe will do everything he can to keep us from raising our interest."

"You're the boss," Hale said glumly. He glared at Rick. "Where are you going to sleep?"

"In the bunkhouse, I reckon."

"He'll sleep in Vance's room," Lola said. "I'm afraid to stay here alone. I'll be safe with him in the house."

Hale threw up his hands. "Lola, haven't you had enough gossip spread about you? Don't you know what they'll say—"

"I don't care. I'm past caring. I'm fighting. There are some things I can't do, but if I can get the help I need, I'll lick them. That's all I care about."

Hale walked over to the table and picked up his Stetson. "I'll get along. Be back tomorrow night, I reckon." At the door he stopped, suspicious eyes on Rick. "If anything happens to Lola while I'm gone—"

"It won't," Rick said, "but something's going to happen to you if you keep gabbing."

"I'm just warning you," Hale said, and went on past Rick out to his horse.

Rick stood motionless until Hale had mounted and disappeared into the purple twilight. Then Lola asked, "Had supper?"

"No."

"Put your horses away," she said, "then come in. I'll fix something."

XIII

WHEN Rick returned to the house, it was fully dark. Lola, hearing him, called, "I'm in the kitchen."

Rick glanced around the front room. This would be the way Vance Spargo had left it. Rick had seen similar rooms in ranchhouses where there were no women. It would not take Lola long to make her impression upon it. He wondered how it had been when she had lived here. Probably the same as it was now, for Vance Spargo had not been the kind to let his sister dominate him. This had been his house and his ranch.

Rick went on into the kitchen. Lola had set a place at the table for him, and was at the stove frying ham and potatoes. She said, "I haven't been home

long, so there isn't much to eat. Curley brought some things from town, but I didn't know what I needed and he didn't, either."

She poured coffee, and Rick dropped into a chair and rolled a smoke, relaxed for the first time in hours. Then it struck him he had no right to be.

She brought a plate of biscuits to the table and went back to the stove for the ham and potatoes, moving with the flowing rhythm of a naturally graceful woman. While he ate, she opened a can of peaches, emptied it into a dish, and placed it before him, then sat down on the opposite side of the table.

"What happened that Rawlins let you go?" she asked. When he hesitated, she added quickly, "Don't tell me if it's something you'd rather not talk about."

"It's kind of touchy," he said evasively.

She watched him, smiling a little. When he finished, she said, "It's only fair to warn you that my chance of saving the Hatchet is a mighty slim one, even with your help. It would be easier if I went back to The Dalles and let Tebo have the Hatchet. I'd be rid of Kinnear that way."

Rick rolled a smoke. "Long odds don't scare me, if that's what you're getting at. If there's any chance, we'll play it out."

"I heard that you and Wildew were pardners," she said. "Did he stay on the Bent R?"

"He's there now, but I don't reckon he'll stay." Rick pulled on his cigarette, then added, "We wasn't exactly pardners. Riding with him just got to be a sort of habit."

She was silent, her eyes on him. Suddenly he felt the need to talk and she seemed interested. He told her how it had been, drifting around, and about Wildew saving his life in Dodge City, and the years since then, hiring out their guns and fighting for other men, and the dissatisfaction that had steadily grown in him.

"There's a lot of things I don't savvy," he said. "Mom was good. She used to read the Bible to me. We were poor, but she kept me in school till she died. She used to talk about what was right and what was wrong, and about not doing the things I'd be ashamed of. I got mighty tired of her preaching. Just let it go in one ear and out the other. I'd heard about men like Wildew. Thought I wanted to be like them. After I started riding with him, for a while I worshiped him."

"But you aren't like him," Lola said. "I don't think you ever will be."

"No. That's what I don't savvy. I mean, the older I got, the more I thought about how I wasn't getting anywhere. It never bothered Matt, but I got to thinking that if somebody plugged me, there was nobody on God's earth who'd give a damn. They'd bury me and put up a marker and that'd be the end of Rick Malone."

"I don't think it's hard to understand," she said. "The things your mother taught you made more impression than you realized. You aren't the kind to let other people shape you. Vance was. Folks thought he was big and powerful, but he was weak. Inside, I mean. If he hadn't been, Kinnear would never have influenced him the way he did."

"Yeah, I reckon it took time for me to grow up." Rick thought of Nan, almost a child compared to Lola. There might come a day when she would regret the decision she had made this afternoon, but it would be too late. He added, "Sort of came to a head after me and Wildew got to the Bent R. I thought I was in love with Nan. She said she was in love with me, but today I found out different."

HE WASN'T sure whether Lola was surprised or not. She nodded. "Nan's a nice girl. She'd make you a good wife."

"She won't make me any kind of a wife," he said bitterly. "Lou blew up when I told him. Nan and me figured he would, and she said she'd go with

me. Said she'd seen women wait and get old. I thought she meant it, but today she turned me down. Had to stick to Lou, she claimed, and she knows he's crazy as a loon with his big talk about bringing the Bent R back and grabbing your range."

"There are different kinds of love," Lola said. "Nan had one kind of love for her grandfather and another for you. Had you thought of that?"

"Sure, but if a woman loves her kin more than the man she's going to marry, why, she don't love the man enough to make him a good wife."

"I'd hate to make that choice," she said slowly. "I loved Vance, but I was ashamed of him. I hated some of the things he did, but I still loved him."

"Me and Nan are finished," Rick said roughly. "Maybe Grant Jenner's her kind. She keeps saying he ain't, but maybe that's because Lou has done his damnedest to throw 'em together. She says she won't be bargained over."

"I know how she feels," Lola said.

"Well, she can have Jenner." He rose. "Guess I'll go to bed."

"I'll go, too. The dishes can wait until morning." Lola got up and dropped a heavy bar across the back door. "You don't know how much better I feel with you here. I guess if anybody wanted to break in, it would take more than a bar to keep them out."

"Kinnear?"

She nodded. "I'm scared, Rick, right down to my toes." She barred the front door. Turning, she smiled, trying to hide her fear. "I wish Joe knew you were here. Then he'd let me alone."

"I'd better sleep down here. If anybody tried to get in—"

"I want you up there across the hall from me." She picked up the lamp, nodding at another on the table. "That's yours. Come on."

He followed her up the stairs, a strange uneasiness in him. Lola was too fine to be hurt by gossip. She would not be defying it this way if circumstances had not forced her into a position where she felt she was utterly helpless.

She stopped in the hall and opened a a door to a bedroom. "This was Vance's room. It's yours now." She lifted her eyes to his. "I have a terrible feeling that I'm putting you and Curly into more danger than I have any right to. Mr. Tebo, too. Kinnear would ruin him if he knew Tebo had promised me more time. Maybe I'm just stubborn in trying to hold the Hatchet."

"It's more than keeping the Hatchet." He went into the room and put the lamp down on the marble-topped bureau. "You're not wrong. I'm remembering what you said about folks taking orders and letting Kinnear run everything. Well, we ain't taking his orders."

"We." She repeated the word softly. "Rick, you'll never know how much you've done for me tonight."

"I ain't done nothing yet."

"Yes you have. When I heard what Fleming said, I wanted to curl up and die. After what you did, I came alive again." She swallowed. "I'm more used to selfish men who never do anything unless they get paid for it."

She crossed the hall to her room. He heard her close her door. He started to shut his own door but decided against it. He was a sound sleeper. Something might happen, and he could not take the risk of sleeping through it.

He jerked off his gun-belt and threw it on the bed, then pulled off his boots. The room was austerely bare, a man's room with just a bureau, a bed, and one chair. For a long time he sat there, thinking of Vance Spargo's death and how it had changed everything in Chinook county. It had been like turning a pack of wolves loose on the valley.

RICK got up and began walking around the room, knowing he could not sleep if he went to bed. He was able to think of Nan now with cool detachment—just an incident in a lifetime. He would not let it be anything else. He had lost her; he had to accept that without worrying about it.

He could not love a woman who did not love him. It seemed simple now. Nan had been starved for affection and he had been handy. It must have been the same with him.

He sat down and rolled a smoke, his mind turning to Lola's trouble. There was a lot to be done and not much time. She had been honest with him in every way. She had no illusions about her chances, but she had courage. She'd fight to the finish.

Slowly his mind, focused on the woman who was sleeping across the hall from him, found the answer to her problem if she was willing to take his way out. And with her help, he could put all of his past behind him.

He heard Lola's door open. He turned as she came into his room, worried eyes on him. She said, "I couldn't sleep and I heard you pacing around. Is something wrong? I mean, because we're alone are you thinking what Nan—"

"No." He spoke more sharply than he intended to. "I've been thinking. That's all. I know what to do about your worry, but I ain't sure you'll do it. Sounds crazy."

It was crazy. He had met her only this afternoon. To her he was just another gunslinger like Matt Wildew.

SHE laughed softly. Rick, if you know what to do, you've got to tell me. I don't, and I've racked my brain ever since I've got back."

She had put a robe on over her nightgown and her hair hung down her back. He turned away. She was expecting too much from him. He was a man, with a man's passion, and she was the most attractive woman he had ever met. What did she think he was made of? Why in hell couldn't she stay in her bedroom and lock the door?

She came to him, touching his arm hesitantly. "What is it, Rick?"

He wheeled and took her hands. He said savagely, "We're both crazy. Me for wanting you, you for trusting me."

She was not offended and she did not draw back. She breathed, "Rick, if I told you what I thought you were, you would not only think I'm crazy but indecent besides, because I know that just this afternoon you went and left the girl you love."

"Shouldn't have told you," he muttered. "All right, I had a case of puppy love. Let's forget Nan. What I was going to say is—now here's Kinnear, wanting to marry you. If you were out of his reach, he'd let you alone. Then you wouldn't have any more trouble."

She shook her head. "I don't think he'd ever let me alone. But I know you're thinking about the gossip and me having you here in the house with me. All right, Rick. You've heard the old saying about if you have the name, you might as well have the game."

It took a moment for him to understand. There was none of the subterfuge about her that characterized so many women, none of the slyness and the trickery. Even in this she was straightforward and direct.

He put his arms around her and she lifted her face to his kiss. It was not like any kiss Nan had ever given him. It sent a hot flame burning through him. He felt the softness of her breasts against his chest; his hands were hard against her slim back, and her lips were warm and clinging. When he let her go and drew away, her face was still turned up to his and she let him see the hunger that was in her for him.

"Rick, I don't know what you're thinking about me, but—"

Someone pounded on the front door, the hard hammering blows of an angry man. Lola whirled and started out of the room. He caught her and, grabbing her arm, held her. He said, "I'll see who it is. Stay here."

He picked up his gun-belt and buckled it around him, then Kinnear's great voice reached them:

"Open up, Lola! Let me in, or I'll kick this damned door down!"

XIV

GAZING after Rick as the young gunslinger rode off, Matt Wildew remained motionless beside the corral, squinting against the slanting light of the dying sun. Usually he could face any situation with cool indifference, but now he was filled with outrage. He had spent six years training Rick Malone; he had saved the boy's life more than once; he had insisted that any employer who wanted him had to take Rick, too.

That everything Wildew had ever done for Rick had been prompted by selfish motives did not enter his mind now. All that he could think of was that Rick had ridden away, breaking off with him, and that he had added insult to injury by threatening to beat his teeth down his throat.

Then Wildew laughed. It was all right. If they had stayed together, Rick might have become a liability. There were some things he hadn't learned in six years, and now Wildew was convinced he never would.

Wildew began thinking about what Rick had said. Lola Spargo suspected Kinnear of having killed her brother. He might have, Wildew thought. Wildew did not have the slightest doubt that if it would profit Kinnear, the lawyer would not have hesitated to shoot his best friend in the back.

Wildew smoked a cigarette, his sharp mind considering another thing Rick had said. The Spargo woman thought Kinnear had put Fleming up to saying what he had about her so that she would hear it. No ordinary man would have done that, but Kinnear was capable of using any weapon he could lay his hands on to humble Lola Spargo.

Whether the gossip about her was true or not was not important. Lola would be hurt if it was fanned into life again. She would not be able to stay here, alone and friendless, to face it.

There was one more important fact. If Fleming had been carrying out Kinnear's orders, Fleming must be working for Kinnear. That meant Deke Cardigan had been taking Kinnear's pay, too, so now Kinnear would need another man. Fleming wasn't smart enough to play a lone game.

Now Wildew found the answer he had been groping for from the moment he had heard of Spargo's death. Kinnear could be made to pay big if the job was guaranteed. He had too much at stake to risk losing now. The possibility of Wildew making the big stake was here before him, and there would be no splitting with Rick.

Quickly Wildew walked into the bunkhouse and packed. He saddled his horse and loaded his pack-horse, then went into the house. He had no qualms about what he planned to do. He had never quit an employer before when the man still needed him, but it had always paid him to stay on. In this case it would pay him to quit.

Rawlins and Jenner were still sitting at the table. Nan stood at the stove, her back to him.

"Rick won't be back," Wildew said brutally. "He's hiring out to Lola Spargo."

"That bitch," Rawlins said. "You hear, Nan?"

She didn't answer. Jenner got up, his eyes on the girl, then sat down again, his usually cheerful face grave. For a moment Wildew stood there, watching them and grinning. They made him feel superior. Fools like these let their feelings control them. A smart man never did. Matt Wildew always controlled his feelings.

"I'll take my time," Wildew said.

Rawlins got up. It was the second time within the hour that he had been too shocked to think coherently.

Nan said, "Pay him and get rid of him. We're better off without him."

RAWLINS started around the table, his gnarled hands fisted. He said, his voice shaky, "I still need you. You can't quit now."

"Never count on men like me and Rick," Wildew said carelessly. "You've

got to do a job yourself if you want to have it done right." He motioned toward Jenner. "Don't count on hombres like him, neither. They say you used to be the big gun on this range. How'd you get there? By yourself, wasn't it? If you ever get back up there, you'll do it yourself."

"You're damned right I will!" Rawlins shouted. "You're scared, ain't you? You figure I'm licked and you're running out because you're scared of Kinnear!"

Wildew's face turned ugly. "Don't talk that way to me, old man. Gimme my *dinero* and I'll ride out."

"Pay him," Nan cried again. "Just get rid of him."

What Happened to POCAHONTAS

HISTORIANS can't make up their minds how much of the Pocahontas legend is true, but it is known what her fate was. Six years after she was supposed to have stopped one of her father's braves from beheading explorer John Smith, she married John Rolfe, a planter. He took her back to England with him a few years later and the glamorous daughter of the mighty Powhatan became popular in British Society, where she was known as Lady Rebecca. But her brief taste of white man's civilization ended in tragedy. She developed tuberculosis and died shortly thereafter. She lies buried in Gravesend, a little town 24 miles south of London.

—*Harold Helfer*

"That's right," Wildew said. "Pay me and get rid of me. Rick was fool enough to pull out and leave you owing him, but not me."

"So you ain't scared," Rawlins muttered. "Then why are you pulling out?"

Wildew said the first thing that entered his mind. "You fired Rick. Don't reckon I want to stay on here by myself."

Nan went to Rawlins and put her arms around him. She said, "Pay him, Grandpa. You don't want a man you can't count on."

"No." Rawlins dug into his pocket. "No, I don't."

He threw fifty dollars in gold on the table, the coins giving out a clear metallic ring. Wildew said, "Another ten, old man."

"The month ain't out yet," Rawlins snapped. "Take it and git."

Wildew shook his head. "There ain't much left of the month. I earned a month's wages. Fighting man's wages, and that means another ten."

"I ain't got no more," Rawlins muttered.

"You'd have had a hell of a time paying us if we had stayed on, wouldn't you?" Wildew laughed. "Well, it'll square it if I take one of your horses."

"Here." Jenner threw another gold eagle on the table. "Now will you slope out of here?"

Shrugging, Wildew picked up the money and put it in his pocket. As he walked to the door, Rawlins made a savage motion. "Keep going, Wildew, you and Malone. Till you're plumb out of the county. You hear?"

Wildew raised a hand in a mocking gesture of farewell. "You never was big enough to give me an order I didn't want to take. It's going to be fun, watching 'em pull you down off your high horse."

He walked out, leaving Rawlins trembling with anger.

Mounting, Wildew took the road to town. When he came opposite the Hatchet buildings, he wondered if Rick was there. He'd had some doubt that Rick actually meant to work for the Spargo woman, although there had been no reason for him to lie about it.

He could make out three horses racked in front of the house. Perhaps Kinnear was here. If he had run into Rick, Kinnear would need help. It would be one way to start working for the lawyer, although another plan had shaped itself in Wildew's mind that held far more promise.

A man stalked out of the house, mounted, and rode down the lane. Wildew, pulled back into the willows, saw that the horseman was Curley Hale, the Hatchet ramrod. The crew had probably gone back to the cow camp. This could mean that Rick and the Spargo woman were alone in the house, something Kinnear would find interesting.

Wildew had assumed Hale was on his way to town. Instead the Hatchet foreman splashed across the river, and went on, riding north at a brisk pace. Wildew reined toward town, smiling. This, too, would interest Kinnear.

It was dark when Wildew left his horses in the livery stable. He took a room in the hotel and, leaving his bedroll there, went to the dining room and ate supper, considering that in some ways he might be smart to wait until morning and see Kinnear in his office. Then Wildew decided not to wait. He thought Kinnear would like what he had to propose, and would not want to postpone action.

THE town was quiet, a fact that Wildew found amusing. These people didn't know it, didn't know it, but the quiet wouldn't last long. When the blow-up came, it would rock all of them back on their heels, from Prine Tebo on down to the saloon swamper.

Wildew was standing outside the hotel when Cord Graham cruised by. The lawman recognized him and stopped, his weathered face shadowed by worry. He asked, "What the hell are you doing in town?"

"Rode in for supper," Wildew said evasively.

"Ain't Nan's cooking good enough for you no more?"

"Not now it ain't. I quit Rawlins."

It took a moment for Graham to digest that, his gaze not leaving Wildew's inscrutable face. He asked, "What about Malone?"

"Rawlins fired him."

"You're lying," Graham snorted. "Lou ain't one to get religion, and he'll be needing both of you."

"Don't call me a liar, Cord," Wildew said, his voice mild. "I've got nothing against you. If you're smart, you'll leave it that way."

"All right, all right," Graham said hastily. "But I sure don't savvy. Why did Lou fire Malone?"

"Ask him. Say, have you seen Kinnear?"

"What business have you got with Kinnear?"

"You're a nosey old devil," Wildew said, and walked away.

Kinnear's house, he soon found, though not the biggest place in Bald Rock, was the newest and most expensive, and he had furnished it with a garish elegance that set it apart from the other dwellings in the cowtown.

Wildew paused in front of the white picket fence, considering how to approach the lawyer. He had to say the right thing at the right time, or he'd fail before he had a chance to tell Kinnear what he had in mind. There was a light in the house, and as Wildew moved up the walk, he realized a tension which was unusual with him.

Wildew's knock brought Kinnear to the door. He frowned, staring at the tall, broad-shouldered shape against the lamplight. Wildew said, "You alone, Kinnear?"

The lawyer did not recognize him until he spoke. He said angrily, "I have no business with you."

Wildew stepped forward. "You're wrong, friend. With Cardigan beefed, you're needing another good man. I'm him. Fleming ain't worth a damn by himself."

The effrontery of it shocked Kinnear. He said, "If Lou Rawlins thinks he can—"

"Rawlins ain't got nothing to do with it. He's broke. I won't work for a man who can't pay me."

Kinnear stepped back to shut the door. Wildew put a shoulder against it. He said, "I figured you for a smart hombre, Kinnear. I've got news. If

you're smart, you'll listen to me."

Kinnear hesitated, then said, "Let's hear it."

"If I ain't good enough to be invited into your house," Wildew said, "you ain't good enough for me to work for."

Kinnear said, "Come in," and shut the door the instant Wildew was through it.

Wildew crossed the hall into the living room. Kinnear followed, hands shoved into his coat pockets. He said, his voice hostile, "Sit down."

"Take your fists out of your pockets," Wildew said irritably. "I didn't come here to get a slug in my guts."

Still Kinnear stood motionless, uneasy eyes on Wildew who was coolly glancing around at the expensive leather-covered couch and chair, the mahogany table, the great stone fireplace that took up most of the north wall of the room, and the painting of Mt. Hood in the ornate frame, the only picture on the wall.

RESENTMENT rose in him. Kinnear had everything anyone could want, yet he was no better than any other man with careless morals. He used weaker men to gain his ends, but he was still a thief, and merited no more respect than a common road agent.

"The law business must pay you pretty well," Wildew murmured.

"State your business and your price," Kinnear said coldly. "I'll be the judge of whether it's a good deal for me or not."

"And after you hear what I've got to say, you'll judge it ain't. Well, Kinnear, it ain't quite that simple. You need me more than the news I've got." A small smile was fixed on the corners of Wildew's mouth. "Has the Spargo woman seen this room since she got back?"

Kinnear blew up. He cursed Wildew in a low, bitter tone, his face dark with savage fury. Wildew broke in, "You can stop right there, Lawyer. It's my guess you wouldn't have her in your house after you hear what I've got to say. Besides, you ain't God, sitting on a fat cloud, so high and mighty you can boot me into hell."

Kinnear dropped onto the leather couch, and when he had control of himself, he said, "Sit down, Wildew."

"That's better, friend, a lot better." Wildew walked across the room to a rocking chair and sat down. "I've got you pegged, Kinnear. I don't know how you got your money, but it was crooked enough, I reckon. Well, that ain't important. You've got plenty and you're going to pay me. Big money. Savvy?"

"If you've got information—"

"It's more'n that. A lot more. I'll do the job Cardigan wasn't fast enough or smart enough to do. You're playing for big stakes. Without me, you're bound to lose. If you take my deal, you'll win. I guarantee it, or no pay."

Kinnear, Wildew knew, would not intend to pay him anything no matter whether he agreed to it or not. But he would pay. Kinnear was watching him intently, a hand coming up to his face and stroking his jet-black mustache.

"You'll guarantee what?" Kinnear asked finally.

"I'm a smart man," Wildew said. "I've been on this range long enough to hear some talk and put it together, so I know what you're working for. It's no secret, I reckon. A purty wife with a ranch. A political job. Nice if you get 'em, Kinnear, but before you do, you've got to kick some people in the teeth. Now I'll fix it up for ten thousand dollars."

Kinnear laughed harshly. "Of all the damned gall—"

"You bet I've got gall, but that don't make no never mind. You're too smart to turn down the best deal you ever had offered you. If you do, there's one man who'll lick you."

"Who?"

"Rick Malone."

Kinnear snorted in derision. "If you think a gunslinging kid—"

"Sure, sure," Wildew broke in, "but he's more'n that. He's one of these crazy

fools you can't buy. Don't ask me why. I've spent six years trying to poke some sense down his throat, but the older he got the harder he was to handle. Now he's gone to work for the Spargo woman and—"

Kinnear jumped up. "What's that?"

"Rawlins fired him tonight and he's with the Spargo woman." Wildew reached for the makings, watching Kinnear's face. "They're alone. Curly Hale rode out tonight, heading north. Figure it out for yourself, friend."

Kinnear dropped back onto the couch as if his knees would not hold him. "You sure?"

"I saw Hale leave. He rode like he was going somewhere. Now I think the Spargo woman will like Rick pretty well, and she can pick him up on the bounce. He figured he was in love with Nan Rawlins, but she turned him down when it came to leaving Lou. Nothing like another woman's arms when a man's just lost the one he wanted."

Kinnear threw out a hand in a violent gesture. "I don't believe it. You're lying!"

"Suppose me'n you ride out there."

XV

NOW for the first time since Wildew had come to Chinook County, he saw Kinnear's confidence shaken. Hunched forward, his meaty shoulders slack, the man was afraid, Wildew thought, to accept the challenge.

Wildew rolled his smoke and fired it, waiting. There was no sound in the room except Kinnear's heavy breathing and the ticking of the clock above the fireplace. Then Kinnear said slowly, "All right, we'll go out there. If you're lying to me—"

"Don't waste none of your tough talk on me," Wildew broke in irritably. "Save it for Malone. He's handy, Kinnear. You found out how handy he was with his fists and you saw him down Cardigan. He's smart, too. I'd give odds on him licking you unless I'm siding you."

"I don't savvy," Kinnear said slowly. "You and Malone were partners and you're supposed to be a man whose word is good. Now you're doublecrossing Malone."

"I'm smarter'n he is. We busted up." Wildew waited for Kinnear to digest that, then added, "I'll tell you how it is. I'm getting too old for this business. I've got to make my stake and get out, or I'll wind up with my belly full of lead. You're going to give me that stake."

This was talk Kinnear could understand. He asked, "What have you got to offer that's worth ten thousand?"

"Before I tell you that, I want to know where Fleming is."

"Why?"

"He tried to drygulch Malone and missed. Malone says he'll hang around here long enough to get you and Fleming. I've got it all figured out, but I need Fleming."

Kinnear thought for a moment, then said reluctantly, "He's holed up in the old Dolan house."

Wildew nodded. "That's fine. We'll light out for the Hatchet and you can see if Malone's there. Then we'll find Fleming. Just one thing, Kinnear. If you try to cheat me, I'll kill you."

"Nobody threatens me—" Kinnear began belligerently.

"I ain't threatening you. I'm just telling you." Wildew rubbed out his cigarette. "You don't like me, Kinnear. That's fair enough because I sure as hell don't like you. You're a back-shooting killer. That makes you low enough to walk under a sidewinder's belly with your fancy Stetson on."

Kinnear froze. "What do you mean, calling me a back-shooting killer?"

"Spargo. That's who I mean."

"He was my friend. Why in hell would I kill him?"

"Don't know, but Lola Spargo thinks you done it. That's why she and Malone will make a tough team. You want her and you want the Hatchet. You want Rawlins out of the way because you want the range all the way up to the head of Pine River. With Rawlins

dead, Jenner wouldn't be no bother. That right?"

"You're talking," Kinnear said sullenly.

"Now I want a straight answer. Are we making a deal or not?"

"All right," Kinnear said, "but you've got to understand I'm staying out of it."

Wildew grinned. "Your kind always does. Now, after you leave the Hatchet, I'll get Malone out of the house and take him to the old Dolan place. I'll hold him there while Fleming plugs Rawlins. Then we'll pin the killing on Malone. Nan and Jenner will testify he had a hell of a row with Rawlins. With Graham sheriff and you the district attorney, you ought to be able to nail him for Spargo's killing, too, before you're done with him."

Kinnear got up and began pacing around the room, frowning as he considered this plan. It was fool-proof if Fleming took care of his part. Shooting a man from ambush was something he would do for a price.

"Soon as you get the ten thousand, you'll clear out of the county and stay out?" Kinnear asked.

"I'll burn the breeze getting out," Wildew said. "And by that time the Spargo woman will be damned glad to marry you."

"Leave her out of it," Kinnear said sharply. "Get your horse. I'll meet you on the road east of town."

WILDEW walked rapidly back to the stable and saddled his horse. He had no illusions about Kinnear's honor. Even if everything went as they had planned, Kinnear would laugh in his face when it came time to collect the ten thousand, but he wouldn't laugh long, not with the muzzle of Wildew's gun in his belly. And once Wildew had the money, he'd be hard to find.

He met Kinnear on the road a mile east of Bald Rock. They rode on together, saying nothing. When they reached the lane that led to the Hatchet buildings, Wildew saw a light in an upstairs window of the ranch house. He had supposed Lola and Rick would be in bed and asleep.

"Wait," Wildew said, and reined up. "Somebody's awake."

"It doesn't make any difference," Kinnear snapped. "I'll see if Malone's there. If he ain't, I'll know you're lying and the deal's off."

"You going to tackle him alone, or you want me to trail along?"

"You stay here. You'll have a hell of a time getting him out of the house if he knows you're working for me."

"I thought maybe you was afraid of him."

"Not any," Kinnear snapped.

He rode up the lane and disappeared in the darkness. Wildew sat his saddle, smiling, thoroughly satisfied with the way this had gone. The only danger was that Kinnear might lose his head and try for his gun. If he did, he'd be a dead man, but he probably knew that.

As Wildew waited there at the head of the lane, he put his mind to the problem of getting Rick out of the house. Presently it came to him how it could be done. . . .

For a moment after Rick and Lola recognized Kinnear's voice they stood motionless, then Lola whispered, "What do you suppose he wants?"

"I'll find out." Rick picked up the lamp and walked into the hall.

He went down the stairs and set the lamp on the table. Lifting the bar, he opened the door, right hand on gun butt, but he saw at once that Kinnear was not looking for shooting trouble. The lawyer stood on the porch, glaring, a bitter, angry man.

"What are you doing here, Malone?" he demanded.

"Working for Hatchet."

Kinnear came in, demanding, "Where's Lola?"

"Upstairs."

"I want to see her."

"She don't want to see you. Let's get this straight, Kinnear. You ain't

fooling nobody. It ain't Tebo who's after the Hatchet. It's you. One of these days I'll be looking at you over a gun-barrel. Might save trouble if we settled this right now."

As if Kinnear had not heard, he circled the room, a muscle in his cheek beating with the regularity of a pulse. Then he saw his picture on the floor and faced Rick. "You tell Lola I want to see her, or I'll go up to her room."

"You won't make it past the first three steps."

Kinnear wheeled toward the stairs. "You won't shoot a man in the back," he said, and put a foot on the first step.

"Don't go any farther," Rick called, and drew his gun.

"Wait, Joe!" Lola called, and came down the stairs.

Kinnear drew back, his eyes fixed on her pale face. She was worried and frightened, but there was something else on her face, the glory of a woman who has just been kissed by the man she loved. Kinnear may have noticed it, or perhaps he was just suspicious, finding her alone with Rick, in a nightgown and robe, her dark hair down her back.

"Have you lost your mind, staying here with him?" Kinnear demanded.

"No."

"Where's Hale?"

"Gone."

"Where?"

"Hatchet business, Joe. I'm not as bad off as you tried to make me think last night. We're going to pull through."

KINNEAR swung around to look at Rick who had dropped his gun back into leather. Then he gave his back to Rick again, plainly puzzled. "Why did you hire Malone?"

"I need him. I'll fight you with every weapon I can find, and a gun in Rick's hand is an effective one."

"But I'll help you, Lola. A gun won't change anything unless you plan to rob the bank."

"You aren't as tough as you were last night, Joe. Sure you'll help me, but on your terms. I won't deal that way."

"Lola, I'm asking you once more to marry me."

She said, "No."

He motioned toward Rick. "A man would have to love you to want to marry you after finding him here."

"A strange kind of love!" she cried. "You'd destroy any thing or anybody you loved!"

"You bitch," he breathed. "You man-hungry bitch."

Rick had held his temper under a tight rein, but now his control broke, and he lunged for Kinnear. He would have killed the lawyer then, for in that wild, crazy instant all the teaching Wildew had given him about not losing his head was blotted out by the red curtain that fury drew across his mind.

Lola jumped between them, crying, "Rick! No, Rick! We'll let him hang himself."

She backed up against Kinnear, facing Rick who stopped and wiped a hand across his face, the fury dying in him. Lola had suffered enough without having to watch another killing.

"Get out!" Rick motioned toward the door. "You can stop nagging her. She's going to marry me."

He saw Lola tremble, one hand coming up to clutch her throat. He watched Kinnear stalk to the door and when the man reached it, he said, "I don't like the notion of being dry-gulched. I don't aim to run the chance of having you or Fleming take a shot at me every time I poke my head out of doors."

Kinnear kept on going. He didn't say anything; he did not look back. Rick waited until he heard Kinnear's horse galloping down the lane, then closed the door and barred it. When he turned, Lola had moved beside the table, one hand upon it as if her legs would not support her.

"So I'm marrying you," she breathed. "I didn't hear you propose."

"I figured the only way to get him off your neck is for you to marry someone else. I was going to ask you to marry

me, but I didn't get a chance."

She walked to the couch and sat down, as if utterly weary. "Have you forgotten about Nan?"

"I don't figure Nan has anything to do with me. I don't have no big ideas about being anything, but I want to amount to something."

"I know," she said in a low voice. "I guess all men do."

"Not the way I do." He sat down beside her. "Maybe it's just that I've got to the place where I'll change or go on like I was and I don't want to do that. I'll wind up being another Matt Wildew."

"You were in love with Nan," Lola breathed. "If you married me, you'd keep on thinking about her and wondering how big a mistake you had made."

"I never would." He took her hand. "This afternoon Tebo told me I could make a place for myself in this country. That's what I'd like to do. You can help me and I can help you."

"Just a business deal," she said scornfully. "It's no good, Rick."

SHE began to cry. He felt a sudden burst of irritation. She was acting like a woman now, inconsistent and emotional. He had not thought she was like that. She was tackling a man's job and he had thought she would see this the way a man would, but now she sat with her head bowed, her shoulders shaking.

The irritation died. He couldn't blame her. Too many things had happened. He took her hands.

"Listen, Lola, I found out something when I kissed you. I said what I wanted to do sounded crazy. It still does. We've known each other just a few hours. But I can do a lot for you I can't if I'm just a hired hand. Let me have a chance. I won't hurry you. Maybe in time I can be the kind of man you could love."

She pulled her hands away from his and, finding a handkerchief in the pocket of her robe, wiped her eyes. She said, "Vance hated crying women. I guess all men do, but I couldn't help it. It just seemed the wrong way for us to start."

"If you don't want me," he said, "say so."

She rose and stood looking at him. "I can't say that, Rick. I'll try—"

A hard rap on the door brought Rick to his feet, hand instinctively reaching for his gun. He didn't draw it. He dropped his hand, glancing at Lola. It was a habit he had to break. Like Wildew, he had learned to think first of his gun when it came to settling any problem.

"I'll see who it is," Lola said.

"No." Rick stepped in front of her. "I've got a hunch this is my kind of business."

The knock came again, harder this time. Rick moved to the door, calling, "Who is it?"

"Matt. I'm supposed to fetch you back to the Bent R."

"I ain't going back," Rick shouted. "You ought to know that."

"Damn it, open the door!" Wildew shouted. "Old Lou just stopped a slug with his brisket."

Lola cried out involuntarily. Rick hesitated, uncertain what he should do. At the moment he felt no regret if Lou Rawlins was dead. That feeling surprised him, for he had never been able to think of death in the cold, detached way Wildew did, but he was thinking of it that way now, and it worried him. Perhaps some of Wildew's cussedness *had* rubbed off on him.

"Let him in," Lola said.

XVI

OPENING the door, Rick stood to one side, right hand drawing his Colt from leather. He would never be able to trust Wildew again.

"Mighty slow," Wildew grumbled as he came in. "Put that iron up, damn it. I'm just an errand boy."

"How did it happen?" Lola asked.

"Bushwhacked. Shot through the window from outside."

"Who did it?" Lola asked.

"I wouldn't have a guess as to that, ma'am," Wildew said. "I was asleep in the bunkhouse. Seemed like Lou was sitting there in his front room when somebody plugged him from outside. When I got into the house, Lou was dead and Nan was blubbering like crazy."

It was like Wildew to say it that way. Irritation crowded Rick. Wildew's cussedness had not rubbed off on him. Not much of it anyhow.

Rick said, "Nothing I can do."

"Nan wants you. I told her you wouldn't come, but she said you would."

"Get Jenner."

"She wants you. Jenner wouldn't do."

"Tell her I ain't—"

"No, Rick." Lola was beside him, her hand on his arm. "You've got to go. I think you'll find out for sure how you feel about her."

"I know how I feel," he said bitterly. "It's over, I tell you."

"Please, Rick. She's in trouble."

She was right. He glanced at Wildew, knowing that he would see the man's cynical grin curling the corners of his mouth. He could guess what the gunman was thinking. Soft spot! Well, he had it and it would be in him until he died.

"All right, I'll go," Rick said, and went upstairs for his boots.

When he returned and picked up his hat from the table, he realized that Lola's eyes followed him as if haunted by the fear she would not see him again. He came to her and put his arms around her.

"I'll be back," he said. "Don't make no mistake about that."

He went out of the house, and when the door closed, Wildew said, "You're making real headway with her, kid. I didn't figure you were that smart."

Rick wheeled, his taut temper snapping. "Matt, I told you once I'd knock some teeth down your throat. You say that again and I'll do it."

"Don't be so damned ringy," Wildew said mildly. "I ain't blaming you."

Rick strode on toward the corral. As he saddled his horse, he was wondering who had killed Rawlins. Not that he was surprised. Rawlins had made a pest of himself. Kinnear would have it easier with Rawlins out of the way. Graham, too. Now the sheriff could lay Spargo's killing on Lou. Then another thought hit Rick with a jarring impact. Curly Hale might have killed Rawlins, for the old man's threats had been directed at the Hatchet.

Mounting, Rick joined Wildew in the lane. As they rode away, uneasiness grew in Rick. Hale did not seem like the kind of man to kill, but in a time of stress like this men did things they would not ordinarily do.

The sky was clear, stars burning with the sharp glitter characteristic of the high country. There was no moon and, as they rode, the valley narrowed until the rimrock crowded in against them, the black walls making two sharp lines against the sky.

They passed several deserted ranches, all Hatchet holdings now, but once had belonged to little men, and Rick remembered how Lola had wished it were possible to undo the things Vance had done. Now Lou Rawlins was dead, and indirectly Vance Spargo had brought that about. Perhaps that had been in Lola's mind when she had begged Rick to go to Nan.

"Lou cash in right off?" Rick asked.

"I reckon. The slug got him dead center. All I found was that a horse had been hitched out past the corral. Tracks didn't mean nothing."

HALE probably wasn't the killer. It seemed more like Fleming than anyone else Rick could think of. Rick wondered what Grant Jenner would do now, without Rawlins to tell him what to do. Maybe Jenner could be thankful for that.

As they neared the old Dolan place, Wildew's horse swung close to Rick. The gunman's hand darted out and lifted Rick's Colt. He said, his voice casual, "You know me well enough to be

damned sure I wouldn't miss at this distance even in the dark. Pull up."

Rick reined to a stop, surprised. He blurted, "What the hell are you pulling off?"

"Just a little scheme I thought up," Wildew said. "Get down. Leave your horse here. I'll put him away when I get around to it."

Rick obeyed, knowing Wildew too well to take any crazy chance now. He swung out of saddle, Wildew ordering, "Come around here. Slow-like."

Again Rick obeyed. Then Wildew said, "Get into the house."

"Maybe you'd better tell me what this scheme of yours is."

Wildew laughed. "I always said your soft spot would get you killed. I'd never jump into no bog hole like you done, but you didn't even suspicion something was wrong."

Rick walked through the weeds of the yard. Wildew called, "Open up. I've got him."

The door swung open, Kinnear saying, "Took you a little longer than I expected."

Rick went into the house. Wildew a pace behind him, gun muzzle a few inches from the small of Rick's back. On Kinnear's battered face was a malicious expression of triumph. Fleming was there, too, lips pulled away from big teeth in an ugly grin.

"You need practice," Rick said to Fleming. "You done some poor shooting this afternoon."

"Shut up," Fleming growled. "Or I'll start practising on you right now."

"Stop your gabbling," Kinnear said, exasperated. "You fizzled today. Don't fizzle again."

"I won't," Fleming promised eagerly.

"Five hundred if you pull it off," Kinnear said. "Then get out of the country."

"Rawlins is as good as dead," Fleming said.

"Got that rope, Fleming?" Wildew asked.

Rick's eyes touched each man briefly. Kinnear's right hand was in his pocket; Wildew still had his gun lined on Rick's belly. Fleming had wheeled to a corner and picked up a rope.

"Get him into the chair," Fleming said. "I'll tie him so he'll stay tied."

"Matt, I'd think I was asleep and dreaming this if—"

"Do what you're told," Wildew said softly.

There was no choice. They'd cut him down if he made a play now. He sat down and Fleming tied him, hands behind his back, ankles together, then looped the rope tightly around his chest so that he was bound against the back of the chair. Then Fleming moved around him and looked down.

"Think I'll wait and watch 'em hang you," he said.

Wildew jerked Rick's hat off and handed it to Fleming. "Leave it by the corral."

Fleming took the hat with his left hand, then raised his right and cracked Rick on the side of the head, a vicious blow that sent stars pinwheeling across his vision.

"You damned yellow belly!" Wildew kicked Fleming hard in the seat. "Get out of here!"

Fleming almost fell. He wheeled, cursing Wildew, a fist cocked.

"Wildew, if you do that again—"

"Don't scare me." Wildew jeered.

"Fleming, so help me," Kinnear shouted, "I'll do this job myself if you don't want the five—"

FLEMING went out, slamming the door behind him. Kinnear stood motionless until he heard Fleming ride away. Then he nodded at Wildew. "Put the horses in the shed. I'll wait here till you get back."

Wildew left the house. Kinnear walked around, frowning. Rick asked, "Rawlins ain't dead yet?"

"Not yet." Kinnear stopped and looked at Rick, stroking his mustache, much pleased with himself. "So you're going to marry Lola, are you? Well,

Malone, I want to see that."

Rick said nothing. Kinnear began pacing again. Rick, looking around the room, saw that the windows were covered with blankets. Anyone riding by would not see the light. It didn't make any difference. No one riding by would help him. He could not save Rawlins's life; likely he could not even save his own.

It was evident that no one had lived here for a long time. Dirt had blown in through a broken window, the wall paper was torn off in long shreds, and there was no furniture except the chair to which Rick was bound, and a battered table. Mary Dolan had taken everything to town with her.

Wildew came in. He said, "Better dust, Kinnear. You need to be in town before sunup."

"Graham will be out here before noon," Kinnear said.

After Kinnear left, Wildew stood looking down at Rick, his face grave. "Things change, don't they, kid? Now your soft spot is going to get you killed. Know how? At the end of a rope, Rick, and that's a hell of a way for a man to die. . . ."

In the kitchen of the Bent R ranchhouse, it was dusk by the time Nan Rawlins finished the supper dishes. She could hear the low talk from the front room where Jenner and her grandfather had gone after they had finished eating. She could not make out what was said. It did not seem important to her. Nothing did.

She left the house and walked to the timber where she had waited for Rick so many times. He would never come again. She leaned against a pine, staring up at the sky, and for the first time in her life, it seemed distant and coldly hostile.

Darkness was moving in, the first stars beginning to show with the pale silver of early evening. The cool air was damp and heavy with mountain smell. This was her world and she loved it; she could not think of living anywhere else. She wondered if that had had anything to do with her turning Rick down.

It seemed to Nan that she both hated and loved her grandfather, although that seemed impossible. Or perhaps she hated herself for her weakness when she had been forced to make a decision.

Or had it been weakness? She owed so much to her grandfather. Rick was wrong. He could have gone away and come back when everything was settled. If he loved her, he would have done that. If he loved her!

She sought refuge in the thought that Rick had never really loved her, then, being inherently honest, she could not be sure she had ever loved Rick.

Mary Dolan had never doubted her feeling for Hank. It had not been that way with Nan. And there was Grant. In spite of all her protests she could not overlook his kindness, his constant loyalty. Grant had put up with Lou's bossy, bullying ways because of her.

Nan seldom cried. She could not cry now. It would have been better if she could have. Tears would have relieved the deep ache inside her. She had never felt this way before. Time might change things, she thought. No, it probably wouldn't. Rick was gone.

Gone! She said the word aloud, realizing then she had been unconsciously listening for his footsteps as she had so many times, standing just as she was now under this pine.

SHE knew, and Rick had had the same conviction, that her grandfather was wrong. Any sane man of Lou's age would have been satisfied to live his life out here. There would be no trouble now that Vance Spargo was dead. Let Lou and Grant put their places together. That was all right. It was this reaching out for something which was not theirs that was wrong. Wrong or not, though, Lou Rawlins would not change.

Nan wondered about her mother. She could not remember her. She had not known many women—a few neighbors.

and Mary, the only girl her own age among them. After Hank had been killed and Mary had moved to town, Nan had been the only girl in the upper end of the valley.

Nan did remember her father, a mild man who had been much like Grant Jenner. He had bowed to Lou from force of habit, and Nan had the feeling that Lou's bullying had worn him down until he had not wanted to live. Now it had killed something in her. Then, with the memory of past injuries flooding her, she reached her decision. She would leave the Bent R if her grandfather did not give up his crazy project of fighting for the Hatchet outfit.

With that determination firm in her mind, she walked back to the house. It was now completely dark outside, except for the thin starshine, and she did not see Grant until she reached the back porch. He stood there silently waiting for her. She stopped a step away from him, trying to see his face, but to her eyes it was only a pale blob that seemed to be without expression.

"I've been looking for you, Nan," he said. "I had to talk to you."

"I'm glad," she said softly. "I'd feel better if I could talk to someone."

He sat down on the steps and pulled her down beside him. He said, "There are a few things I've got to know. Lou swears he's heading out for the cow camp in the morning and that all hell won't stop him. I've never quarreled with him. I've just tried to get along. But maybe that's because I haven't got any backbone. Just mush. That's what Rick Malone thinks, ain't it?"

"Let's not talk about him," she said in a subdued voice.

"We've got to. If you love him, that means you don't love me and never will. I've got to hear it one more time. If you tell me now, I'll believe it. Then I'll go see Prine Tebo in the morning. He'll buy the Diamond J and I'll get out of the country and stay out."

She gripped his hand. "Don't do that, Grant. It's been your home for a long time. You'd never forgive yourself if you sold the Diamond J."

"Maybe not," he said somberly. "But I couldn't stay here and see you married to Malone and having his children and being happy with him. I'd rather be a thousand miles away."

"He'll never come back."

"I think that's up to you," he said. "He will if you want him, but I'm thinking you're young and maybe you just thought you were in love with him. You've been alone so long, never seeing anybody but me and Lou and our crews."

"I've been alone too much all right," she said dully. "Rick was somebody new. He'd been to a lot of places. I—I liked him. I wasn't really fair, telling him I'd go away with him. I must have known I couldn't when the time came."

"You ain't answering my question," Grant said doggedly. "If you think you could ever love me, I'd go along with Lou just because he is your grandfather."

"No, Grant," she said. "We know he's wrong. Dont ruin yourself because of me."

"Maybe you keep thinking of me like I was your brother or something. That won't do for me. That's why I had to see you tonight. You've turned me down dozens of times. I've kept coming back because I've always believed that some time you'd change. Now I've got to know. I can't keep on coming back."

"Don't press me now," she whispered. "In the morning I'll know."

"If you don't know now, how will you know in the morning?" he asked bitterly.

HE STARTED to get up, but she pulled him back. "I made one decision tonight, Grant. You've got to make the same decision. If Grandpa goes ahead, I'm leaving. I'll go in and tell him now."

"He's gone to bed," Jenner said. "I

don't think you can leave him, or you'd have gone with Malone."

"This is different. I won't leave him because of someone else. I'll do it to keep him from making a mistake that would ruin all of us."

Jenner said, "I've thought about this till I'm about crazy. When Spargo told us last spring he was going to run us out, I was willing to fight. Now it's different, but Lou can't see it. He's crazy, Nan. That's the whole thing, crazy with thinking about how big he used to be. He won't quit trying till he's dead."

"Let me have tonight, Grant," she whispered. "I love you. Not the way I thought I loved Rick, but I love you. He was a stranger. It was kind of exciting just to have him around. Or maybe it was because I'd known you so long I didn't know how I felt. I just took you for granted."

"If you'll marry me," he said humbly, "I'll make you happy. I promise."

"Would you take me, knowing you had only part of my heart?"

"I'd take you any way I could get you," he said. "I love you that much."

It was more than she deserved, though she had an idea that in time she could love him, really love him. Somehow she had to push her grandfather far enough out of her life so that his shadow would not forever be between her and Grant. Her husband must be her man; he must be a free man.

"I don't know," she said miserably. "It still comes back to Grandpa. I guess anyone else would say he's made his bed and he can lie in it, but if we went away, I'd worry about him. Nobody to rub his back when he gets rheumatism. Nobody to cook what he likes. I'm the only one who knows how to do things for him."

"I'll be back here at sunup," Grant Jenner said. "I've knuckled down to him too long, and I'm going to tell him so in the morning."

He rose, and this time Nan did not try to hold him. She said, "I'll tell him I'm leaving if he keeps on."

"Maybe that will be enough to stop him," Jenner said. "Good night, Nan."

"Good night, Grant," she said, and sat there until he rode away.

XVII

CARRYING the lamp, Nan left the kitchen. She paused for a moment outside her grandfather's door. He was snoring with regularity. Trouble had never kept him awake.

She went on to her room, certain that it would make no difference to him whatever she or Grant said. Lou Rawlins was so stubborn nothing in the world would change him.

She closed the door and stood looking around, wondering if this was to be the last night she would be here. She opened a bureau drawer and took out a tintype of her mother, one she had studied many times, wondering if she was like her mother. Lou never talked about her. Nan had the impression that they hadn't got along.

She put the tintype back and lay down on the bed, still wearing her riding clothes she had put on that morning. She dozed fitfully, but realized with something of a shock that Rick was not in her thoughts. Her mind was on Grant and her grandfather, and she wondered if anyone else had ever been caught in a trap like this that offered no escape.

She must have slept finally, even without undressing, for suddenly she was aware that it was dawn. She heard Lou get up, grunting and yawning as he did every morning. She heard him start the fire in the kitchen range, and when it was crackling he knocked on her door.

"Time to rise and shine!" he shouted. "Grant's going to eat with us and then we're lighting out for the cow camp."

"All right,' she called, and his steps faded.

She rose, tired all the way through

her slender body, so tired that she thought she could not stand the hours that lay ahead. She went into the kitchen and set the tea kettle on the front of the stove. Lou would be back in a few minutes, impatient because breakfast wasn't ready. She'd have it out with him, then she'd pack up and leave.

Could she do it? Or would it be the same as when Rick had forced her to make this same decision?

The crack of a rifle was as unexpected and shocking as thunder from a clear sky. It came again, the second shot hard upon the echoes of the first. She grabbed a Winchester from the wall and ran out through the back door. In the pearl gray light she saw Lou lying halfway between the house and corrals. She glimpsed the blurred figure of a man running for his horse, and she fired.

Ordinarily, Nan was a good shot, but she was trembling now, and the light was too thin for accurate shooting. She missed, levered another shell into the chamber and pulled trigger again. The man stumbled, but regained his balance and reached his horse. As she fired again he was in the saddle and galloping away.

She dropped her rifle and ran to her grandfather. He was still breathing, but blood was a scarlet froth on his lips, and she knew at once he was dying. She sat down beside him and took his head in her lap, thinking this must be a nightmare, that she was still asleep.

Lou stirred and reached for her hand. His eyes were open, but he found it hard to talk. No, this was not a nightmare. She bent down. He breathed, "Don't know who got me. He was yonder by the corrals."

"I'll get the doctor. Grant will be along."

"No time. You'll be all right, you and Grant."

He tried to say something more, but strength had fled. He was staring at her, eyes blank in death, and a trickle of blood ran down his chin and onto his beard. She was still sitting there, holding his head when Grant rode into the yard. He dismounted and knelt beside her.

"Dead?"

"Yes," Nan breathed. "Somebody got him when he went out to water the horses."

"You see who it was?"

"No. I saw the man but I didn't know him. I shot, but he got away. I couldn't see very well, Grant. It wasn't light enough."

He ran toward the corrals.

THE sun was showing above the pine ridges to the east when he came back, walking slowly, reluctantly carrying a battered Stetson that had once been black, and now was dust-covered and faded by the sun until it was a sort of vague, dirty gray.

"You know whose this is?"

Grant knelt beside Nan, holding out the hat. She knew, and something died in her, the ghost of the faith that had clung to her through the hours since Rick had left the Bent R.

"Rick's," she said. "He couldn't have done it, Grant."

"This'll be all the proof Sheriff Graham needs," he said, as he poked a finger through the bullet hole in the crown. "You must have come mighty close."

She turned her head away, and for a moment she thought she could not go on living, knowing this. Grant would tell the sheriff about Rick's quarrel with Lou the afternoon before. Wildew had heard it. He'd tell, too. And if they put her on the stand, she would have to say the same thing.

"I'll hitch up the wagon," Grant was saying. "We'll take the body into town. We'll tell Graham. It'll be up to him."

Gently she laid Lou's head down and rose. She faced Jenner, trembling, her hands knotted at her sides. "Grant,

they'll hang Rick."

He took her hands, looking down at her, the red sunlight on his face. "You still love him, don't you?"

"No. I don't love him. I'm sure of that now, but I wouldn't want to see him hang. Maybe somebody left the hat here to frame him."

"We've got to tell Graham," Jenner said doggedly.

For the first time in her life she felt that there was real strength in Grant Jenner, strength and courage, and she had a haunting feeling that he might go after Rick himself and be killed.

"All right, we'll tell the sheriff, but promise me you'll leave this to him. I don't want Rick's blood on your hands, Grant, and I don't want to lose you."

She walked into the house, trying to understand this killing. She couldn't believe Rick had done it, for he was not a man who would have killed Lou this way. But when she rode away from the Bent R, sitting on the spring seat of the wagon beside Grant Jenner, with Lou's body in the bed covered by a canvas, she could only think, "If it *was* Rick, they ought to hang him. . . ."

WILDEW stood staring at Rick, his pale blue eyes expressionless, no trace of regret on his narrow face. He said, "You're going to have quite a wait, kid." He sat down on the floor near the door, his back to the wall. "Want a cigarette?"

Rick said, "No."

Wildew finished his own smoke, then dropped flat on his back in front of the door so that it could not be opened without disturbing him. He said, "You passed up a good deal, kid. Ten thousand from Kinnear to help wind up his dirty business. Fleming takes five hundred and is just as happy as a kid with a gum drop." Wildew chuckled. "I'll have the stake I want and I won't be splitting it with you."

"You don't figure anybody'll be fool enough to think I plugged Lou, do you?" Rick demanded.

"That's exactly what I do figure. Kinnear'll make a circus out of your trial. He'll have reporters here from Portland. They'll write you up big—gunman turns on his boss because he wouldn't let you marry his granddaughter. Kinnear'll be the best known man in the state."

Rick stared at Wildew, lying there as motionless as a log, eyes closed. Wildew had a talent for resting anywhere, under any circumstances, but the slightest sound would bring him back to a keen sense of awareness.

Silently Rick strained at the ropes that bound him. No use. Fleming had done his job well. There was no slack, no slipping of the knots. Escape was impossible even if Wildew had not been with him. They would not kill him, if Kinnear wanted to get publicity out of his trial. If he put on a good enough show he might be elected to Congress, all right, but he would never marry Lola Spargo. For no matter how big and powerful Kinnear became, Lola was one person who would not be humbled by him. Rick found some satisfaction in that thought.

The hours dragged by. Even if there was a chance of appealing to Wildew to release him, Rick could not bring himself to try persuading the cold-eyed gunman.

Looking ahead, Rick's mind leaped from one future event to another that seemed destined. Lou Rawlins would be killed. Rick himself would be released at the precise moment that would make his capture by Sheriff Graham a simple matter. They would take him to jail. A sense of futility settled upon him. He was powerless to prevent any of these things.

Rick mentally tabulated the few people who might help him. He thought first of Lola who would do all she could for him, but it would not be enough. Curly Hale? Probably he would not turn a hand. He had been

suspicious of Rick when he had left the Hatchet, and when he returned, he would be so busy trying to save the spread he would have no time for anything else.

Nan? Rick could not be sure, but he had an idea she would hate him. She would probably believe he had killed her grandfather—exactly as Kinnear and Wildew wanted her to, and had planned it. It would be the same with Grant Jenner. Grant didn't like him too well as it was, and if he believed that Nan had loved Rick, he would dislike him that much more. Tebo? No chance at all if he was tied in with Kinnear and Cord Graham, as he undoubtedly was.

That was the list. Lola was the only one he could depend on. To make it worse, Rick had no money with which to hire a good lawyer. It probably would make little difference anyhow, with Kinnear controlling the court.

The cards were stacked. He stared at Wildew, a violent burst of fury flaming in him. He shouted, "Matt!"

Wildew sat up and rubbed his eyes. He got up from the floor and lifted a corner of the blanket that covered a window. It was daylight. He jerked the blanket down and blew out the lamp. He turned to Rick then, his cool, meaningless smile on his lips.

"What's biting you, kid?" he asked.

"I've been thinking." Rick said. "Had a lot of time. It's funny, just damned funny, you saving my life and taking me along with you, and now you're putting a rope on my neck."

"What's funny about that?"

"It's always funny when anybody's as dead wrong as I've been, ain't it? I used to think you were the biggest man on earth. I even gave you credit for having some principles."

"Oh hell, are you harping on that again? I'll tell you something, kid. I've always had one principle. Just one. I figure to do what's best for Matt Wildew. If you'd thought as much of Rick Malone, you wouldn't be sitting there, tied up like a calf for branding."

"You're making one mistake, Matt. Lola knows how I happened to leave the Hatchet. She knows the time I left. It won't jibe. You told us Lou was already dead when you got to the Hatchet."

Wildew shrugged. "It'd be just her word and yours. You won't get nowhere with that yarn, not with Kinnear handling the trial."

"Another thing," Rick said. "You claim the soft spot I've got will keep me from drilling you. It won't. When I get my hands on a gun, I'll smoke you down and I'll laugh in your face while I'm doing it."

"You'd try maybe," Wildew said, "if you got a chance, which you won't. If you think you're going to get me to cut you lose just so we can find out who's the fastest, you're loco."

"You're scared," Rick taunted. "You know damned well I can beat you to the draw."

"I was never scared of anything in my life," Wildew said. "I ain't slowed up yet. I will in time. That's why I kept you around and taught you all I know about gunfighting. I figured you had sense enough to stick with me. You were my insurance against the day when I would slow up, but you had to start thinking too much." He shrugged. "I'm just taking care of my own future."

WILDEW said it casually enough, but Rick sensed that the gunman felt as strongly about this as he was capable of feeling about anything. It explained why Wildew had stooped to a game he would ordinarily have had no part in.

"You're a miserable, crawling thing," Rick said bitterly. "You always claimed you weren't like Fleming, but hell, you're worse. You belong under a rock right beside him."

"Go ahead," Wildew said indifferently. "Talk as ornery as you want to, if it makes you feel good."

A horse was coming down the road. Wildew wheeled toward the door and opened it a crack, right hand on gun butt. The rider drew up and Wildew threw the door open and stepped out. Rick heard Fleming say, "I done it, and the girl took a few shots at me like you figured she would. Dug a hunk of meat out of my leg, too, damn her."

"Bad?"

"Naw. I'm all right."

"I'll get to town and tell Kinnear. I'll put your horse in the shed. Don't leave Malone."

"You're damned right I won't," Fleming said wickedly.

XVIII

BLOOD-SHOT eyes pinned on Rick, Fleming came into the house, Wildew followed.

"I don't give a damn about Malone," Wildew said, "but if you beat him up, the sheriff is going to wonder about it and it'll make Malone's story sound good. Don't touch him. Savvy?"

"Graham won't believe nothing Malone says," Fleming muttered. "He'll do anything Kinnear says."

"You're a fool," Wildew said. "Even Kinnear has to make things look right. You touch Malone and you won't get your five hundred. And I'll tell you something else. I'll burn you down myself if I have to chase you to hellenback."

"You're talking mighty tough," Fleming said defiantly.

"Got any doubts about me being tough?' Wildew asked.

"All right, all right," Fleming said.

"Keep him inside until the posse shows up, then let him walk out of here. Kinnear wants him taken alive. Remember that, too."

"He'll make a run for it."

"He won't get far, and if he don't get his hands on a gun, he won't make no trouble. You get your pay when Graham locks him up and not before. And don't let the posse see you."

"Sure, sure," Fleming said irritably.

Wildew walked out. Fleming closed the door and stood at a window watching until Wildew rode away. Then he swung around to Rick, his eyes filled with a passionate hatred.

"It ain't worth five hundred dollars to let you walk out of here alive," Fleming said. "Not after you tried to drown me in a horse trough and plugged Deke. He was my friend, the only friend I ever had."

"Getting plugged in the back is better than swinging from a rope," Rick said. "When you let me out of here, why don't you burn me down?"

Fleming glowered at him, then limped back to the window. Rick could see the dark splotch on his pants leg.

"So Nan tagged you," Rick said. "What are you going to tell the doc?"

"I won't go to no doc."

"Then you'll get blood poison. Build up a fire and heat an iron. I'll take care of it for you."

"That'd be real smart now, wouldn't it?" Fleming jeered.

"Blood poison's a hell of a way to die," Rick said. "I remember a man in Santa Fe who got gangrene. I'll never forget how he howled. Couldn't stand the pain."

"Shut up!" Fleming shouted. "Damn it, shut up your tater trap!"

Rick let it go at that. He had planted the seed. Fleming remained by the window, and again time dragged out. A wagon creaked by. Fleming stiffened and drew back from the window.

"Who is it?" Rick asked.

"Jenner and the Rawlins girl. You let out a holler and I'll let 'em have you. Jenner would like to put a window in your skull, I reckon."

The clatter of the wagon died and again there was no sound but Fleming's heavy breathing and the squeal of floor boards as he moved restlessly around the room. His leg was hurting him, Rick thought.

"You ought to get that leg taken care of," Rick said softly. "I'd hate to

see a dog die that way."

Fleming wheeled, panicky now, and Rick saw he had overdone it. Fleming struck him across the side of the head, a savage blow. "Open your mug again and I'll forget what Wildew said. I'll fix your purty face so even the Spargo woman won't know—"

The door slammed open. Fleming wheeled, grabbing his gun from leather. Lola stood there, a shotgun in her hands. She screamed, "Don't try it! I'll kill you if you do."

But Fleming, out of his head from worry about his wound and knowing he could expect no mercy from Rick, made his try. As his gun came on up, Lola let go. The charge of buckshot caught Fleming in his middle and tore a great hole in him. He went down, gun falling from his hand, dead before he hit the floor.

Lola ran into the room. "You all right, Rick?"

"I am if I can get out of here. There's a knife in my pocket."

SHE found the knife and cut the rope, fumbling a little. When the rope fell away, Rick rose, walked stiffly to the table where his gun lay.

"Go outside," he said.

Lola turned and fled. Rick knew she was sick. A man killed by buckshot at this distance was enough to make anyone sick. Even Rick could not bring himself to look at the bloody shape on the floor. He put his gun into leather, held himself there until his head quit whirling, then went outside, closing the door behind him.

Lola was leaning against the wall. She had dropped her shotgun, and Rick thought she was going to faint. He asked, "Can you walk?"

"I— think so."

"Let's get into the shed. We don't want to be here if somebody comes along."

He put an arm around her. She was trembling, her mouth working with a crazy, spasmodic twitching. When they reached the shed, Rick saw that his horse was still there. Lola sat down, her head bowed.

Rick walked around, rubbing his wrists and getting the circulation back into his legs. For minutes he said nothing. Only time would restore Lola's self-control. Presently he came and sat down beside her.

"I was a dead man till you showed up," he said. "Even if Fleming hadn't plugged me which he was hankering to do, the posse would have nailed me for Rawlins's killing, and Kinnear would have strung me up."

She looked at him, her face pale. "I killed him," she breathed. "I killed him."

"He'd have killed you if you hadn't. Chances are he'd have drilled me, too. Nobody's going to worry about that ornery son but Wildew and Kinnear." He put an arm around her and held her close. "All the time I sat there I knew you were the only one I could count on. I didn't figure you'd save my hide, though. Not the way you did."

"I wouldn't have shot him if he hadn't pulled his gun," she said miserably.

"You couldn't do nothing else," he said.

He held her, hard pressed by the knowledge that they should be riding, but knowing she wasn't able.

"How'd you happen to find me?" he asked.

"I was worried," she said. "It didn't seem right, Nan sending Wildew after you, so I saddled up, thinking I'd ride to the Bent R to find out what had happened. After the sun came up I saw Jenner and Nan coming. I stopped them. They had Rawlins's body in the wagon."

"They think I killed him?"

"Jenner does," she answered evasively. "Nan saw the man who did the killing, but she couldn't identify him. She shot at him, and when Jenner found your hat, there was a bullet hole in it."

"Fleming must have put that bullet hole in the hat himself." Rick rose. "We've got to get out of here."

"I left my horse by the river," she said. "I didn't really expect to find you, but I thought I'd look in these old houses."

"Can you ride now?" he asked.

She nodded. "They'll search the Hatchet for you. I'd take you there if I thought I could hide you."

"You head for home. I'll make out."

She tilted her head back, her chin thrust at him defiantly. "What do you take me for, Rick? You wouldn't be in this tight if it wasn't for me."

"That don't make no never mind. I ain't going to run and I won't keep hiding."

HE WANTED to tell her that he had too much to live for now to throw it away by running, for he had to keep her respect. But this was not the time. He would tell her later when he was cleared—but he could not think of anything that could clear him.

"You've got to hide for a while," she said. "Something will happen, Rick, but you've got to stay out of jail. If they get you, you'll never prove you didn't kill Rawlins."

"I won't hide,' he said stubbornly.

"Oh, Rick, just until we can think of what to do!"

He rubbed his stubble-covered face. He knew he had to go after Wildew and Kinnear, but if he faced Wildew now, tired and hungry and with stiff wrists, Wildew would kill him.

"Where'll I hide?" he asked finally.

"Can we get into town without being seen?"

"It's daylight. People have eyes."

"Well stay along the river. The willows are thick. I think we can do it."

"What have you got in your head?"

"We need time," she said. "Kinnear hasn't any real friends in the valley, and you have more than you think. We've just got to let it simmer until something happens."

That was like a woman, he thought, hoping for something to happen. But she was right in one way. He needed time.

He asked, "You're trying to talk me into hiding in town?"

She nodded. "In Mary Dolan's house. I think she'll do it."

Crazy. Completely crazy, but it might work for a few hours. He wasn't sure Mary Dolan would hide him, but he was sure it was the last place Graham and Kinnear would look for him.

"All right," he said. "We'll try it."

Lola did not feel the confidence she wanted Rick to believe she had. She could not think of anything that would clear him, and she was not certain Mary Dolan would give him a refuge. Even if she did agree to hide him, his chances of getting into town and into Mary's house without being seen were slim.

The smartest thing Rick could do was to get out of the country, but she knew he wouldn't do that and she realized with a sense of guilt that she didn't want him to. She would never see him again if he did. That, she couldn't stand.

They kept close to the river, the double row of willows between them and the road. If anyone saw them, it was not likely they would be recognized, and it was not probable they would have trouble if they did. There had not yet been time for the news of Rawlins's death to spread through the valley. The posse was the real danger, but Graham would expect to find Rick near the Dolan house.

The feeling of guilt about killing Fleming was gone from Lola now. As Rick had said, she'd been given no choice. Her worry now was Rick's safety. If she hadn't talked to him in town, he would not have been caught in Kinnear's trap. But regardless of that, she would still have been compelled to help him.

She loved him. Foolish, she thought, for when this was over he would prob-

ably ride out of the valley. She had known him such a short time. She wasn't even sure that his feeling for Nan had changed. But none of it made any difference. She loved him.

She glanced at Rick often, riding in the slack way of a man who has been ground down by weariness until his reactions were slower than usual. His face showed a dark smudge of stubble; his eyes were red-veined from lack of sleep. She wanted to reach out and touch him, to let him know how she felt. She couldn't. She could not burden him with a feeling of obligation.

They were not far from town when they heard the beat of hoofs on the other side of the river. They reined up, glimpsing Graham and his posse going by on the road. Neither Kinnear nor Wildew was with them.

The posse would be gone for hours, Lola thought. She wondered what they would do when they found Fleming's body in the Dolan house and Rick nowhere around. Probably they would search the other deserted ranchhouses and it would be evening at least before they came back to town.

WHEN the posse had gone by, Rick gave her a wry grin. "They'll have a ride," he said.

They went on, and out of the countless plans and hazy ideas that crowded Lola's mind, one began taking definite shape. The river, slow-moving and shallow at this point, made a wide curve around the edge of town. They rode through the willows and, fording the stream, pulled up on the town side. Mary's house was less than a block away.

"Stay here till I see Mary," Lola said. "It won't take long."

He hesitated, then said grudgingly, "All right, I'll wait."

She had no way of knowing what he had in mind, but judging from the grim set of his lean face, she feared he had decided upon some plan of his own. She put her horse through the willows and rode on across the empty lot and the alley, and dismounted at Mary's back porch. She knocked, and when the door was opened she was not surprised to see the bitter and unforgiving expression on Mary's face.

"I want to talk to you," Lola said. "I'm here to do a favor and ask for one."

"When I swap favors with you," Mary snapped, "I'll be a whole lot crazier'n I am now."

"Not even for Rick Malone?"

XIX

JUST for a moment Mary hesitated, then she said, "Come in," and moved aside.

Lola entered the kitchen and sat down. Mary closed the door, hostility still in her expression. The kitchen was fragrant with the smell of baking pies.

Mary didn't seem unhappy. Perhaps she was recovering more than the others who had been caught in the web of Kinnear's scheming.

"What's this about Rick?" she asked.

"I want to say one thing before I tell you about Rick," Lola said. "I know how you felt about Vance and I don't blame you, but I hope you won't feel the same way about me."

"You're his sister," Mary said truculently.

"Did it ever occur to you that Joe Kinnear might be more to blame for what happened to Hank than Vance was?"

"I don't like Kinnear, either."

"I'm going to fight to keep Tebo from getting the Hatchet," Lola said. "Indirectly that means Kinnear. If I win, I'll give your place back to you."

"Surprising," Mary said skeptically. "Downright surprising."

"I want to live here," Lola said. "Maybe in time people will accept me for what I am and forget the things they've said about me, and that Vance was my brother."

"You must figure on living a million

years," Mary said. "What about Rick?"

"I said I came to exchange one favor for another. I've told you mine. The favor I want is about Rick. Lou Rawlins was killed early this morning. Kinnear framed Rick for it. A posse has left town to bring him in."

Shocked, Mary sat down. "He would not have killed that old goat. He couldn't marry Nan if he did." Her lips tightened. "Maybe you didn't know about that."

"I knew. And you're right when you said Malone couldn't have done it. Wildew held him prisoner in your old place while Fleming shot Rawlins. Then Fleming came back and was guarding Rick while Wildew came to town. They planned to turn Rick loose so Graham could take him. That's what Rick says and I believe it."

Mary jerked a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped her face. She said, "This is coming a little too fast for me."

"I don't know how to clear Rick," Lola went on, "but I want to try an idea I have. I'm asking you to hide him for a few hours. He was tied up in a chair for most of the night and some of this morning. He needs sleep and something to eat. Will you take care of him?"

"What's Rick to you?"

Lola rose, coloring. "Nothing. Will you do it?"

"I'm still behind in the story. How did Rick get away from Fleming?

"I killed Fleming."

Mary snorted. "You expect me to believe that?"

"You don't have to believe anything. I just want you to take care of Rick for a few hours."

"Sure I'll do that, but it'll be for him and not an account of your fine intentions about giving my place back. Fetch him in."

"It may get you into trouble with Kinnear and Graham."

"That suits me fine. Go on, fetch Rick in. Maybe I can get some sense out of the yarn if I talk to him. For one thing, why would Wildew hold him prisoner?"

"Wildew sold out to Kinnear."

Lola left then, before Mary could ask any more questions. She might change her mind if she knew that Rick had broken with Nan and had come to work for the Hatchet. It was with a keen sense of relief that Lola saw that Rick was still waiting.

"It's all right," she said. "Walk in. I'll leave your horse at the livery stable."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "If I get Mary into trouble—"

"You won't. After dark you can come out to the Hatchet. Graham will look for you there, but he won't think of looking twice."

RICK'S jaw set stubbornly. "Lola, let's get one thing straight. I've got to go after Wildew and Kinnear. This is more'n just me. It's you and Nan and everybody else in the valley."

"Right now it's you, Rick."

He shook his head. "It's like you said about Vance. All you can do is to try to right some of the things he did. Same with me. I can't live the last six years over, but I aim to make the rest of my life different. While I'm doing something about Kinnear, maybe I can clear myself of this frame."

"Not if you're in jail."

"No, but I ain't going to your place to hide."

"All right, Rick. Just go to Mary's."

"Where are you going?"

"To the hotel."

Dismounting he handed her the reins. "I want to see Graham when he gets back. Let me know as soon as he gets into town."

"I'll let you know," she said, and watched him walk through the willows and cross the empty lot.

When he disappeared into Mary's house, Lola rode back across the river and into town, leading Rick's horse. She stopped at the livery, saying, "I

found this horse between here and the Hatchet. You know who he belongs to?"

The stableman's mouth sagged open. "Malone! That's who he belongs to. He stole another horse or he's afoot!"

"What makes you say that?"

"Don't you know?" When Lola shook her head, he said, "That ornery son plugged old man Rawlins this morning and the sheriff's on his trail now."

Lola shrugged. She said indifferently, "Well, take care of his horse," and left the stable.

She went directly to the bank. Tebo closed at noon, but it was not quite twelve, and the bank was open. She waited until Tebo finished with a customer, then came to her.

"Did Hale leave for the railroad?" he asked her.

She nodded. "But that wasn't what I came in for. You've heard about Rawlins?"

He nodded, his face grim. "I can't believe Malone did it. It's not his kind of killing, and I don't see any reason he could have had."

"Don't you know what happened?"

Tebo shook his head. "Do you?"

"I know all of it," she said. "Kinnear framed Malone."

"Could be," Tebo admitted. "Joe would like to see Rawlins out of the way, and he'd want to get square with Malone for that licking." He frowned. "How do you know so much about it?"

"Never mind," she said sharply. "I'm worried. If we don't do something, Graham will put Malone in jail, and Kinnear will convict him."

"Reckon he will," Tebo said, puzzled. "He's never lost a case he wanted to win since he got elected district attorney. But I don't savvy why you're concerned."

"We'll just call that my business. You know Joe's crooked. You know what he's made you do, and you told me he owned Graham. Now Wildew has hired out to him. If we're ever going to lick him, we've got to do it before they get their hands on Rick."

"I can't touch it," Tebo said flatly.

"Then I'll blackmail you," Lola said. "You help get Rick out of this, or I'll break the promise I made yesterday. Rick will go after Wildew, and I know Kinnear too well to think he'll let it be a fair fight."

"What can *I* do?" Tebo cried.

"You'll do something. You did talk too much yesterday. If you don't help Rick Malone, I'll tell everybody in town why you're doing Kinnear's dirty work."

"Nobody will believe you!" Tebo shouted, white-faced.

"Your wife will believe me," Lola said.

Tebo gripped the counter, shoulders sagging, a beaten, harried man. He said, "All right. Tell me what you want me to do."

"I don't know. It's your problem. I suppose Graham will be back this evening. I'll give you until then."

Turning, she walked out, leaving him standing there and staring at her back. . . .

IT WAS late afternoon when Rick woke. For a moment he could not remember where he was. He had slept like a dead man, and it took time for the opiate of sleep to wear off. The sun was beating at him through the west window. Then he heard the low hum of talk from the kitchen. He recognized Grant Jenner's voice, then Nan's, and finally Mary Dolan's, and the full memory returned.

He began rubbing his wrists. He had wanted time and he had gained enough. His wrists were not as stiff as he had expected them to be. He would be as fast as ever; he would kill Wildew or Wildew would kill him. There was no regret in him. Wildew had become a mad dog that must be executed.

Rick took some time with his gun, checking it and making sure that his holster was in exactly the right position. He moved to the mirror and prac-

tised his draw several times. How often he had seen Wildew do this when he faced a gun fight!

"Don't practise too much just before you tackle a man," Wildew would say. "Just be sure you're in shape. The gun and the holster and your eyes and wrist and arm. If you ain't pulling right, figure out some way to put the fight off, or they'll be throwing clods in your face."

Rick was pulling right. He felt it. He thought about Wildew saying he had kept Rick around as insurance against the day when he would be too old to earn a gunhand's pay. Now they would face each other. Perhaps that had been destined from the first.

Wildew had made another thing clear, too. Rick had given him credit for having principles, but he had no principles at all. Everything he had ever done or said had been designed for two purposes—to keep him alive and to get more money. It was strictly a matter of money that had sent him to Kinnear, that had brought about the death of Lou Rawlins and had pinned the killing on Rick.

With both Fleming and Wildew dead, Kinnear might break. That might be only wishful thinking, but Kinnear might break if enough pressure was put on him. Rick knew he could put that pressure on Kinnear if Wildew were out of the way. He had told Lola to let him know when the sheriff got back to town. But it seemed a wild hope that Graham would listen, as long as Kinnear was alive.

Rick opened the door and entered the kitchen. Nan saw him and cried out, a hand coming up to her mouth. Jenner sat as motionless as if paralyzed, eyes on Rick as if seeing something he could not believe.

Mary laughed. "Surprise, isn't it? Well sir, he got me to take him in under false pretenses. I didn't know you two had busted up, Nan." She nodded at Rick. "I've heard the whole story now."

"What are you doing here, Rick?" Nan whispered.

"Sleeping. I was hungry and Mary fed me. It's all written down in the book. She gets an extra star in her crown when she goes to heaven."

"I'm too wicked to go to heaven," Mary said lightly.

Jenner, white-faced, had turned his body so that his right hand was hidden from Rick. Now it moved covertly toward his gun, eyes fixed on Rick. Mary saw what he planned to do. She scooted down in her chair and brought a foot up in a slashing kick that caught Jenner's wrist the instant his hand closed over gun-butt. He yelped and jerked his hand away.

"You made a poor choice, Nan," Mary said. "If Grant Jenner had the guts a man ought to have, he'd stand up and pull. Instead he tried to sneak in a shot. If my judgment of our friend Rick is right, he wouldn't do a sneaking trick like that."

"He's a killer!" Jenner said hotly. "I wouldnt have no chance with him on an even draw. I was just trying to get my gun on him so I could take him in. If he pulled, he'd plug me."

"No," Rick said. "I like Nan too well. You're going to marry him, ain't you, Nan?"

NAN ROSE and came to stand beside Jenner, her hand on his shoulder. She said defiantly, "That's right, Rick. I didn't know how I felt about Grant until this morning."

"I had a hunch I knew yesterday when we left the Diamond J," Rick said. "You were feeling sorry for him. When a woman feels that way, she thinks more of a man than she lets on."

"You're a pair of locoed kids," Mary snapped. "So much has happened that you've got kinks in your ropes."

"There's no kink in my rope," Rick said. "Reckon I should have told you how it was with me and Nan, but I had to have some time. If I'd gone after Wildew this morning, in the shape I

was in, he'd have plugged me sure. Now I can take him."

Mary rose and started toward him, then stopped as if a new thought had struck her. "It's Lola, isn't it, Rick?"

"Yes." Rick looked at Nan, and he saw her as a pretty blonde girl, her dark blue eyes meeting his, but still a girl with the changeable mind of one who lacks maturity. "I guess we were a pair of locoed kids, all right. I'd never been around anyone like you, Nan, and Lou had kept you under a tight rein, so it was natural we'd cotton to each other. Now I can see it's a good thing it worked out this way."

"A damned good thing," Jenner said vehemently. "But we ain't settling nothing. I aim to take you to the jug and you're going to stay there till Graham gets back to town."

"Don't make trouble for yourself," Rick said. "Not if you want to live long enough to marry Nan. It's Wildew I want, then Kinnear. If you had the sense of a loon, you'd know you won't have peace on this range till Kinnear's dead." He nodded at Nan. "I didn't kill Lou. I'd like you to believe that."

"I—I wish I could," she whispered, "but I don't know."

"You think I did, Jenner?"

"It ain't your kind of killing," Jenner admitted grudgingly, "but how do you figure on changing Graham's mind about it?"

"I'm hoping to get the truth out of Kinnear. If I can't, it'll be up to Nan. She's the only one who saw the man who done it."

Rick walked to the stove, picked up a cup and filled it with coffee. He drank it, eyes on Nan. The silence ran on for a full minute. Mary, too, was watching Nan. Jenner got to his feet, kicking his chair back in a sudden burst of temper.

"What do you expect Nan to say?" he demanded. "It wasn't real light and she was worked up, shooting at him and knowing Lou was lying out there. Hell, she can't swear to nothing."

"Fleming was bigger than I am," Rick said. "He must have had his hat on. They'd taken mine."

"Think, Nan," Mary urged. "You must have had some impression about him, even if you couldn't see him very well."

"Damn it," Jenner bellowed, "let her alone! She's had enough trouble for one day."

"If I live," Rick said, "Im going to marry Lola Spargo, if she'll have me. I want to live here. I've got to have my name cleared if I'm going to do that."

"I can't think, Rick," Nan whispered. "I just can't think. He was quite a ways off and he was running. I don't know whether he had a hat on or not."

"Wouldn't prove nothing anyhow," Jenner muttered.

Rick put his cup down. "I reckon Jenner will make you a good husband, Nan. Long as Lou was alive he'd knuckled down so long it got to be a habit. Now it'll be different. Same thing with this county. With Kinnear gone, we'll have honest law, and maybe Tebo will run the bank different. We need that, too."

"You've always been a drifter," Jenner flung at him. "A gunslinger like you will never settle down. It ain't in you to change."

"I've already changed," Rick said quietly. "I can thank Nan for that. I followed along behind Matt because it was a habit, but the older I got, the more I wasn't satisfied doing it. So I busted with him. You know why, Nan, and you know I couldn't have drygulched Lou."

XX

STILL Nan said nothing, and Rick knew that if she did, she would be lying for him because she felt she owed him that much. She simply didn't know. Even if she did clear him, Jenner would never be sure. Other peo-

ple would wonder, and they would never forget.

Rick turned to Jenner. "You know where Wildew is?"

"In the Stag," Jenner answered. "Or he was a little while ago."

It was not yet six. Rick said, "Go tell Wildew he's going to tell the truth about Lou's killing or I'm coming after him. In front of the Stag at six."

"You can't do it!" Mary cried. "He was your friend."

"No," Rick said. "He never was my friend, or he wouldn't have fixed it so I'd hang. I've got to do it this way." He nodded at Jenner. "Get moving. Tell him."

Jenner picked up his hat and walked out. Looking at Nan, who was crying now, Rick thought of how it might have been. How often she had wanted him to tell Lou how it was with them and he had kept putting it off! Then when he had finally forced the issue, she would not go with him. He thought, "It would have been wrong if she had gone with me."

He turned to Mary. "Everybody's been wrong about Lola," he told her. "She's been dragged through a lot of misery, but she's still the finest woman I know. Tell her I love her, if I don't get a chance to tell her."

Tight-lipped, Mary said, "I'll tell her."

Rick left the house, bare-headed. The sun was hanging low in a clear sky above the western rim of the valley, so he walked around the block to come into Main Street from the west. Wildew had often said, "Make the other fellow face the sun. If it's a tight squeeze, that little margin makes the difference."

He came into Main Street, his gun riding loosely in leather, the sun at his back, the red light sharp upon the false fronts. The mud of yesterday was now hardened by the day's dry heat.

He looked at the horse trough where he almost drowned Fleming; he looked at the spot where Cardigan had fallen. Then his eyes lifted to the windows above the bank. Joe Kinnear's office was up there. If Kinnear cut him down, the law would not touch him. Rick was officially wanted for killing.

Then the batwings of the Stag were flung open and Wildew barged out of the saloon.

The news must have reached Bald Rock that Rick Malone had not been found, but that Fleming's body had been discovered, blown half in two by a charge of buckshot. Or at least Kinnear and Wildew must know that something was wrong or the posse would have been back long ago. Wildew and Kinnear would not be surprised, then, that Rick was gunning for them.

As Wildew came into the street, Rick's conviction grew that Kinnear was the more dangerous to him. Then again one of Wildew's precepts beat against Rick's mind, "Don't divide your attention. If you've got more'n one man to handle, don't start fretting about the second one till the first one's out of the way."

Rick raised his eyes to Kinnear's office window, mentally judging where he would be when the lawyer started firing. The horse trough was to Rick's right. If he could reach it, he would be out of Kinnear's sight.

Wildew was moving toward Rick, the familiar, cool smile on his lips, his lean, sharp-featured face impassive. If he had considered the possibility of death, he gave no sign of it. Rick stood waiting, his shadow long before him, right hand within inches of gun-butt.

"You ain't man enough to do this job, kid," Wildew called. "I'm the teacher. You're just the pupil. Remember?"

THIS was an old scene, an old game, vicious and brutal, a game in which Rick knew he must use every trick he had to save his life. But this would be the last time.

When Wildew went down before

Rick's gun, the past would be cut as a sharp knife slashes a taut ribbon with one quick stroke. Lola stood for what lay ahead; Wildew stood for the past that was gone.

"You've got a soft spot, kid," Wildew called. He was coming on, slower now, frowning a little as if expecting Rick to make his play, but Rick stood as immobile as a figure of granite. "I told you I'd kill you. When you go for your six, you'll be throwing down on a man who taught you everything you know. You ain't good enough, kid. You just ain't good enough."

It was one of Wildew's favorite tricks. He always talked when he moved against an enemy, worried him and slowed his draw. But Rick knew the trick and it didn't work.

Wildew was close enough now to make his play, close enough for Rick to see the pale blue of his eyes, the hard, cruel line of his mouth. Then what Rick had been expecting happened, but not in the way he had expected. Two shots sounded from Kinnear's office, one hard upon the other.

Rick felt no bullet; he did not hear the snap of a slug passing his head. There was no lift of street dirt kicked up by a bullet. Then he got it. Kinnear had not fired at him! Someone else had taken chips in the game.

Wildew must have realized the same thing. He drew, and in that breath of time Rick's hand closed over the hard butt of his own gun and he swept his Colt free of leather. It was a reflex, born of long established habit, just as it had been when he'd fought Deke Cardigan.

Rick felt the familiar buck as the hammer fell, and gunflame danced brightly from the muzzle of his Colt. As the roar of the shot rolled out between the false fronts and was flung back in dying echoes, Rick Malone's past died with the going of Matt Wildew. Wildew crumpled, first to his knees as strength went out of them, then down into the dirt of the street.

The slanting sunlight fell upon Rick's back, his long shadow reaching out almost to where Wildew lay. The man's gun lay on the street, unfired, and blood was a spreading stain on his shirt front. Rick stood over him as the street was suddenly filled with people. There was no real feeling in him, no regret. It was as if a great weight had been lifted from him, as if destiny had been fulfilled.

There was the beat of hoofs from the east, and Cord Graham's voice rolled in above the thunder of those hoofbeats. "Drop your gun, Malone!" The sound of the driving hoofs stopped, and Graham's voice came again, "You're under arrest for killing Lou Rawlins, Malone! Drop your gun!"

Rick did not look at the people who stood silently around him and Wildew. His eyes were on the dying man, and he saw that cool, familiar smile on the corners of Wildew's mouth, even when close to death. Wildew did not show the slightest trace of fear of this unknown he was facing.

"You're good, kid," Wildew mumbled. "Mighty damned good. I taught you better'n I knew."

"Tell 'em I didn't plug Rawlins." Rick had never begged anything of Matt Wildew in his life, but he begged now. Graham was out of the saddle, his gun muzzle prodding Rick in the back. "You know what happened, Matt. Tell 'em."

"I don't know a thing about it, kid," Wildew breathed. "There's just one thing I'm sorry about. I'd like to see you dancing on air and your neck pulled out as long as a wash line before I cash in."

"You're dying, Matt," Rick urged. "Tell 'em how you and Kinnear framed me."

"Sorry." Wildew's eyes mocked him. "Kinnear's never lost a case, they say. You'll hang, kid, you'll hang good and high."

"Get it off your soul!" Rick shouted at him. "When you face the Almighty you need one good thing on your side of the ledger."

WILDEW lifted a hand as if to push Rick away, but the hand fell back beside him as pale eyes glazed with death. He said hoarsely, "Go to hell, kid. You'll be there right behind me."

Then he was gone. Rick looked around. Nan and Mary Dolan were there. Grant Jenner. Townsmen he knew casually. He felt the hard pressure of Graham's gun and he was aware that his own was still in his hand.

Nan cried, "He didn't do it, Sheriff! You've got no call to arrest him."

"The hell he didn't!" Graham bawled. "Cutting Wildew down won't save his neck."

Tebo was there then, shoving through the crowd, his face haggard. He said, "She's right, Cord. Kinnear framed him. They planted Malone's hat, figuring you'd believe it was Malone."

Graham passed a hand over his face. He asked, "How come you know so damned much about this, Tebo?"

"I just shot Kinnear," Tebo said. "He was figuring on cutting Malone down from his window. I got to his office without him knowing it. I told him to put his gun up. He shot at me and I got him. Before he died he told me how it was."

Rick wasn't sure whether Tebo was lying; he would never be sure, but it didn't matter. Tebo's word was enough to clear him. Graham had moved back, his face taking on the pallor of a man who has lost everything in life that counted to him.

"You plugged Joe?" Graham drew a long breath.

"Go up and take a look," Tebo said wearily. "It was self-defense. You want me?"

"No." Then Graham raised his voice at the crowd. "Get off the street, the lot of you. Tote Wildew over to the doc's office. Go up and get Kinnear." He motioned to the posse. "Put your horses up."

"I want to see you in your office," Tebo said. "You, too, Malone."

Rick nodded, eyes swinging upward to the second-story windows of the hotel. He saw Lola's face, pressed against the glass. He shouldered through the crowd to Nan. He said, "Thanks for trying." He looked at Jenner, whose face was grim, with no trace of the easy smile that usually lingered on his lips. "Take care of her, Jenner, take good care of her."

"I will," Jenner said. "I will."

Rick wheeled away and caught up with Graham and Tebo. They went into the sheriff's office and Graham closed the door.

Tebo said, "We know what we've done, Cord, you and me, and I'm not proud of my part in it. Are you?"

Graham lowered his eyes. "Don't know what you're talking about," he muttered.

"Then I'll make it plain. Kinnear owned you body and soul. You wanted the star just so you could be big and lord it over everybody else, but you aren't big, Cord. You never were. Just you and me left of the old-timers now that Lou's gone. In the old days you weren't anything but a thirty-a-month cowhand nursing Bent R beef. Then Kinnear kicked you upstairs and you took his orders and shut your eyes when you knew damned well he plugged Vance."

Graham glared at him, trying to hold to his pride, and failing. He jerked off his star and threw it on his desk. "All right, Prine. Looks like a new deal all around. I'll be riding."

"Reckon I will, too," Tebo said. "In a few days. It's time for the young ones to run this country. They won't make as big a mess out of it as we have."

"Your bank—" Rick began.

"I'll sell out as soon as I can," Tebo said. "I'll sell my house and I'll take my wife and get to hell out of this country. I never belonged to Kinnear like Cord

did, but I took his orders and I'm ashamed to stay."

Rick held out his hand. "I'm obliged, Tebo. I had you pegged wrong."

Tebo took his hand in a quick, firm grip. "I had you pegged right. You going to marry Lola?"

"If she'll have me."

"She'll have you," Tebo said. "She loves you. She hoorawed me into doing what I did today. You'd have been dead by now if I hadn't."

"Thanks—"

"Don't thank me," the banker snapped. "Go thank Lola."

"I will," Rick said, and wheeled out of the office.

HE STRODE rapidly toward the hotel, knowing that all of his happiness depended on what happened in the next few moments. On the street knots of men still were talking about the killing. They looked at him curiously. He went on, ignoring them. There was nothing to say now. Time held all the answers to his problems, time to forget, time to make his place among these people.

He went up the stairs, feeling the clerk's eyes on his back, eyes that held the guarded respect of one who did not want to tangle with him again. The door of Lola's room was open, and when she heard him she turned and waited.

"I'm glad, Rick," she said. "I was afraid for you."

He pulled his gun and threw it onto the bed. He said, "Tebo killed Kinnear and he cleared me. He's going to sell his bank and leave town. Graham's giving up his star. Tebo said it was Kinnear who killed your brother."

It took a moment for her to gather all of this into her mind and understand what it meant. Then she said, "I wish I knew whether Curly made the deal for our cattle. I'd like to know if we've got a chance to save the Hatchet."

He crossed the room to her and took her hands. "I don't think it makes much difference about the cattle. Tebo will fix it for us." He swallowed, searching for words. Everything depended on him saying this right. "I love you. It sounds crazy, us knowing each other for such a little while, but it seems like I've known you for an awful long time."

"A long time," she murmured. "It has been a long time, Rick, years and years all packed into a few hours. But are you sure you want me?"

"It's the first thing in my life I was ever sure about," he said. "It ain't like it was with Nan. I'd follow you anywhere you went. I wouldn't give you up. I won't let nothing come between us. I quit when Nan wouldn't come with me." He paused, searching her face and finding there what he sought, and he added, "I ain't worried about the past. It's gone and done with. It's just the future that counts, and we'll make it count."

He put his arms around her and she whispered, "I knew last night when you kissed me. I was afraid you didn't."

"I knew," he said, "but I couldn't tell you then. I wanted everything settled. A lot of things to be done yet, but we'll do them."

"We! Always think of it that way, Rick. Never you or me or the Hatchet."

He kissed her the way a man kisses the woman he loves. She had his love and he had hers. It was more than he had ever dreamed of possessing. It was all he wanted. It was enough.

A TEXAN CLEANS UP MONTANA IN

GUN FOR HIRE

A Novelet by **ROBERT TRIMNELL** *Coming Next Issue*

BOUNTY SCALPER

A True Story of the Apache Country

By CHARLES B. ROTH

FIVE hundred dollars bounty for Apache scalps!

Desperation had driven Mexican officials to offer the unheard-of bounty when seasoned, hard-fighting troops were unable to quell the ruthless massacres in the Sierra Madre mountain district. The great plains country of what is now Texas and New Mexico had been preserved from Mexican settlement and domination by a comparatively few Apaches and their equally fierce neighbors, the Comanches.

This was a last gamble by Mexican authorities, who saw the rich territories to the north of Apache-land slipping away from them. The bounty, originally $50, was upped to $500 for scalps of adult braves; and they were not too particular in checking the age and sex of the hair they bought. For $500 men were found who would risk life and limb and the certainty of cruel torture if captured.

The golden bait brought the roughest, toughest hombres the world has ever known to Mexico's northern frontier states of Chihuahua, Durango and Sonora. First and foremost of these, rugged leader of this hard-bitten crew, was Irish-born James Kirker.

In the entire history of America there is nothing like the story of these scalp hunters—plying their dangerous trade, laughing at risks and hardships no other group ever faced, and still surviving

The bounty was good—and scalps were bountiful

with hides whole and hair intact. How many Indians they scalped and collected bounty on, there is now no telling. Undoubtedly the total was over a thousand.

James Kirker had lived many years among the Indians. He had become as callous, cruel and savage as the worst of them. He had seen Apaches in their massacres and brutal cruelties, and like so many others of his time and breed, he had killed Indians on sight and whenever the opportunity offered, believing in the common dictum that the only good Indian was a dead one. Now, to be paid for a job he would gladly do for nothing seemed a royal road to fortune. He set out to make the most of it.

For a time Kirker operated scalp hunting in the state of Chihuahua as a private, personal monopoly until, as is the way with men who have too good a thing, greed got the best of him and he queered the deal by his own sharp practices.

Kirker was a bully, a braggart, a blusterer, and an incurable show-off—but he had the stuff to back it all up. His horse and his personal trappings—all gold and silver and precious gems—were like those of some Spanish grandee. In a land where bold riders were a dime a dozen, Kirker was the boldest. He wore his hair long, and strutted down the streets of Chihuahua. He was a gay dog with the *señoritas*, who couldn't deny such a man anything he wanted. Kirker was always wanting something.

AT FIRST he was a lone wolf, more wily and wilderness-wise than the Apaches themselves. A deadly shot, expert tracker and master of knife-fighting, he found little difficulty in hunting down unwary Indians, lifting their scalps and riding back to town to collect his bounty. It was as easy as that—a few hours a week and all the money a man could use. In the desperate business of frontier murder, Kirker beat the Apaches at their own game. No one knows how many of these human tragedies Kirker and his knife or long rifle figured in, because the rocks, cactus and hot sun of the Sierra Madre have never been good historical witnesses. But he was doing all right by himself and enjoying every Indian murder he committed.

Then came to Kirker, as it has to many another, the idea of expansion and increased profits.

If the retail game paid so well, think what could be done on a wholesale scale! Kirker was as bold in his imaginings as in his personal courage, so he hired a bunch of helpers. These were chiefly Americans, rugged adventurers like himself, and included a few Delaware Indians. He opened shop as a wholesale hunter of Apache scalps.

At one time he was directing the operations of 150 hunters, sending them out in different territories just as a successful sales manager will disperse his salesmen where he thinks they will do the most good. And he proved the wisdom of his wholesale operations when he netted more than a hundred and seventy Apache scalps—a net of around $25,000 worth at one swoop.

The Apaches, brought to reason at last, had come into Chihuahua to protest the operations of Kirker and his lads, and to ask for peace. When he heard of it, Kirker, the business man, had an idea. He issued orders to the city fathers to show the Apaches every consideration. He had whole steers put on barbecue pits to feed his guests, and gave them all the hard liquor they could drink.

When they were feeling their drinks and were singing praises of peace and of their friend, Kirker, that worthy turned his hunters loose and killed every one—men, women and children. It was a big job to scalp a hundred and seventy at one time, but Kirker and the boys managed it, and had a big parade through the streets of the town, waving the scalps and shouting wildly. After they had been paid off, the scalps were strung up in front of the noted cathedral of

Chihuahua, where they swung in the breezes for several months.

KIRKER was now the fair-haired boy in all that part of Mexico and the small *rancheros* could enjoy, for the first time in their lives, the semblance of a good night's sleep without fear of Apache raids. Even the Comanches were leary of invading Chihuahua, and concentrated their raids inside the U.S.A., where they had only the opposition of the United States Army to worry about.

Kirker's trouble was that he was just too efficient. He did his work so well he soon had no more Apaches to scalp. Survivors hid away in secret fastnesses of the mountains and became too scarce and wary for profitable hunting. But here was that big crew of hunters of his, doing nothing but sitting around and eating heavily. He had to do something to keep the boys busy or the overhead would wreck him.

One day he hit upon an idea. All scalps look alike, once you get them off the identifying skull—Apache, Comanche, even Mexican. No one was too inquisitive, no one asked embarrassing questions, and he just had to keep the boys busy. A scalp was a scalp. No matter who originally owned it, in Kirker's hand it was still worth the $500 bounty. And so it happened that Kirker and his gang were soon being paid for good Mexican scalps—the very scalps they were supposed to protect. They tried to be careful and cautious about it, but eventually even the trusting Mexican officials realized the Señor Kirker meant to play them all for suckers.

They held up his pay and organized a large force of soldiers to arrest him when he presented himself in town for his voucher. Kirker got wind of this and stayed out of Chihuahua until the scandal blew over. He hung around the fringes, howling that he had been robbed; but eventually, when he saw that he wasn't going to be forgiven, he lit out for California. A couple of years later he died, quite peacefully, of yellow jaundice.

But there were few Indian raids after he left. Almost single-handed, Kirker had succeeded where two centuries of campaigning by the best of the Mexican soldiery had failed. Kirker had subdued the Apaches completely and permanently in that part of the country.

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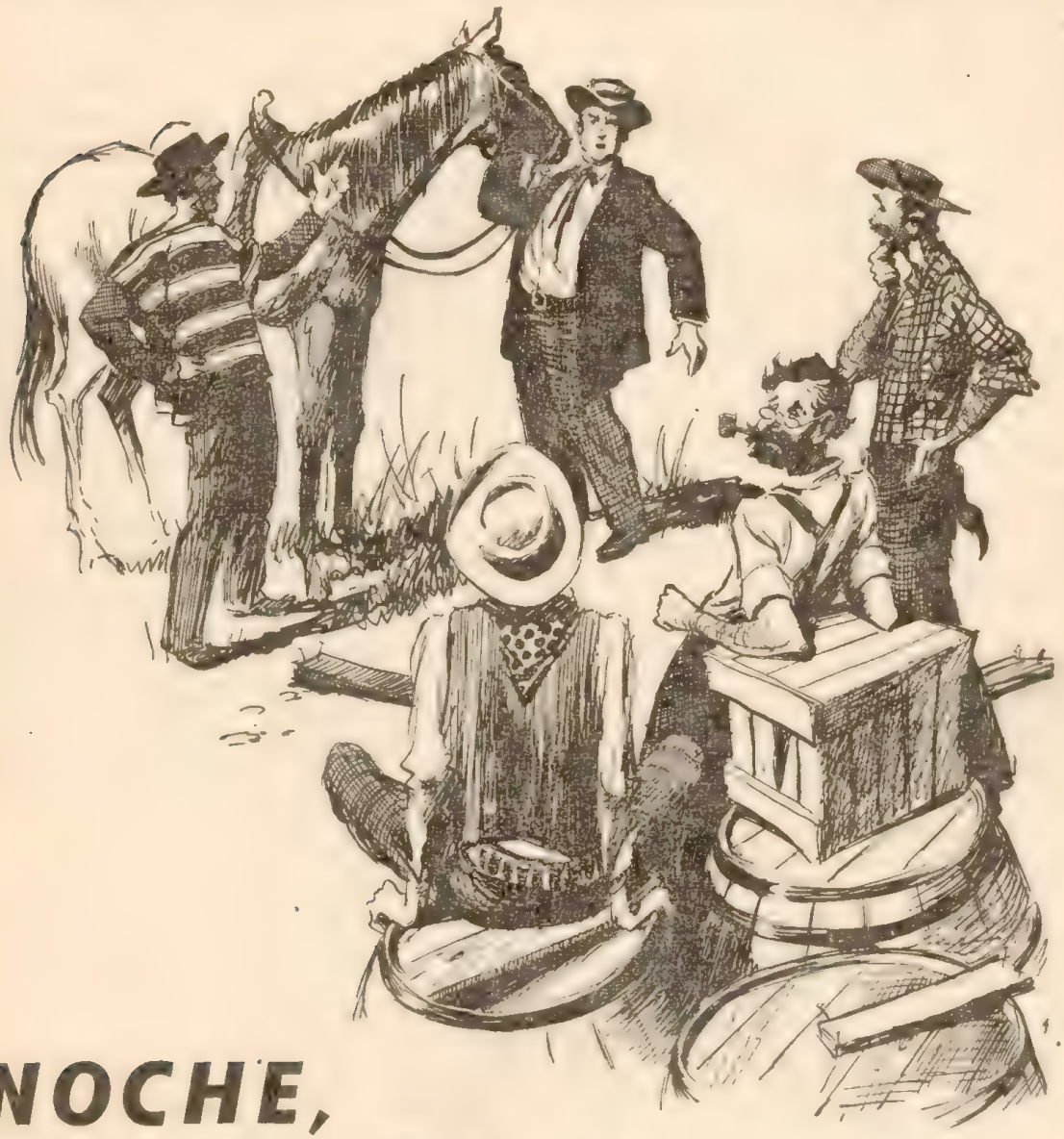
Because no man could make the black stallion obey, he was tagged as Noche, the dumb—but was he dumb, or very wise?



NOCHE, the DUMB

THIS IS the story of Noche, sometimes called Noche, the Dumb. It is one of the horse stories I picked up in Camarillo from the old timers who gather on the warm summer afternoons in the public square, to live again, in memory, the days of their past.

Camarillo was an outpost of the frontier then and the roads across the high, wind-swept mesas beyond it were few and poorly marked.

by PHILIP KETCHUM

Men placed their dependence in life on three things: themselves, their guns, and their horses. They were days of conquest, for the bending of this rugged country to the ways of civilization was not easy.

They have memories—these old men—and many a story to tell to those who will listen. Some are exciting, none are dull. And always, if the story is about a horse, the voice of the man telling it will grow warm. A sparkle will come into his dim eyes. And his shoulders will straighten, as though for a time he has grown young again, and is standing on the corner, watching Ben Heberton ride up the street on Noche.

Noche, the Dumb.

But here is the story, as they tell it. . . .

BEN HEBERTON came to Camarillo from New England. He was short, stocky. A man with a round and chubby face, and with a friendly grin on it for everyone. His hair was sandy colored and his eyes a mild blue and there was a Yankee twang in his voice. He was an educated man. Quite well educated. It was rumored he had been a college professor, and as though in evidence of this, he brought with him a heavy box of books. For years after his arrival it was quite an ordinary thing for the stage driver to pull in with a package of books addressed to Ben among the other freight he had hauled up from San Esteban.

What had brought Ben Heberton to Camarillo was never very clear to anyone, and Ben never offered a clear explanation. "Just thought I'd like to come west," he would say when asked. "Thought I might like the country, and I do."

That was quite evident. The heat of summer didn't seem to bother him. He was used to the cold of winter. He learned to ride and often borrowed a horse for a trip into the hills, sometimes staying overnight at some farm or ranch. He worked at a variety of jobs, some of which paid him nothing, as when he ran the hotel for Ollie Knobbs when Ollie was ill.

He was easy to touch for money, if he had it. People said of him that Ben would split his last dollar with a man he didn't know if the man looked hungry, or even said he was. And when Ben started his school for the Mexican kids in the Mexican settlement across the river, no one was really surprised. It was the kind of thing to expect of Ben Heberton.

It was about a year after he opened his school that Ben met and fell in love with Molly Jelliffe. He was forty at the time, or over forty, and Molly had just turned twenty. She was a beautiful girl, slender, not too tall, with deep brown eyes and hair which caught and held the glow of the sunset. It is no wonder, perhaps, that Ben fell in love with her, for most of the unmarried male population within a hundred miles of Camarillo was in the same boat. And probably a few married men, as well. Molly was a vivid person. There was music in the sound of her voice, excitement in her laughter.

Ben was a pretty direct person, and after struggling with this feeling for a while, and trying unsuccessfully to stifle it, he rode out to the Jelliffe ranch and had a talk with Molly's father.

"It's no go, Ben," said Frank Jelliffe, scowling.

"You think I'm too old for her?" asked Ben.

Jelliffe ran his work coarsened fingers through his hair. He said, "Ben, it's not your age. You're one of the finest men I know, and one of the most impractical. I don't want my daughter to have to slave for the man she marries."

"I wouldn't ask her to," said Ben.

"No, but it would amount to that. Tell me honestly, how much money do you have?"

"You mean right now?"

"Right now."

A crooked grin crossed Ben's face. He said, "Twenty five dollars. But I've never tried to make money. Never thought much of saving. I—"

He broke off. He was scowling, and realizing suddenly that what he was saying was damning in Jelliffe's eyes. To Jelliffe, a tight-fisted cattleman, the worth of a man was measured by what he owned.

"Molly's not serious with anyone," Jelliffe was saying. "Young Bill McAdams is around here almost every night, but it will be a couple years before Bill could afford a wife. If you really want my daughter, Ben, why don't you see what you can do for yourself with a real job? Something which would support her. Forget that Mex school you're running. Quit being an easy mark."

It was quite late that night when Ben rode home, and he felt halfway happy for even though Bill McAdams had been over to see Molly, she had been awfully friendly to him. And Frank Jelliffe hadn't definitely opposed his suit. Jelliffe's terms weren't hard. Every man ought to look ahead. It was time that he did.

The music of Molly's voice was still ringing in his ears when Ben got back to Camarillo and found Pedro Laros waiting to see him. Pedro, who was in trouble and needed twenty dollars. Pedro, who was a swell guy.

"It will not be a loan," said Pedro with dignity. "For the twenty dollars which I must have I will sell you Noche."

"Noche?" said Ben.

"*Si, mi amigo.* A horse which I acquired in a trade with Tejon, the Indian, only a week ago. And what a horse! Black as the night for which he is named. Swift as a night spent in the arms of your beloved. Gentle as the night which will someday come to us all."

"In other words," said Ben, grinning, "a good horse."

"The finest, *mi amigo.* And may the saints forgive me for selling him so cheaply. But unless I have the money—" And Pedro shrugged his shoulders expressively.

He was being a chump, Ben knew. He was doing again what he had sworn on the way home he would never do. But at least, this time, for the twenty dollars he was giving Pedro he was getting something in return. He nodded his head and said, "All right, Pedro. Here's the twenty. Pay the bank the interest on your loan the first thing in the morning."

"Of a surety," said Pedro. "And Noche? Shall I bring him here?"

"After you have paid the bank."

NOCHE was delivered to Ben Heberton the next morning. He was as black as Pedro had promised, a glistening black, unusual in a mustang. And large for a mustang. He stood close to sixteen hands high and weighed, at a guess, near a thousand pounds. He carried his head erect and there was spirit in the look of his eye and the promise of speed in the lines of his body.

Several men had come with Pedro. They grinned as they stood around watching Ben admire the horse. Now and then they whispered to each other, chuckling.

"There's a horse for you," said Ben finally, stepping back. "A real horse. What do you think of him, Max?"

"Sure looks like a fine horse," said Max Bell. "Let's see you ride him, Ben."

A sudden suspicion jumped into Ben's mind. He was no expert horseman and if Noche was an outlaw—

"Can't I?" he demanded. "Pedro told me he was gentle."

"I reckon he is," Bell nodded.

"You know him?"

"Yep."

"Would you have paid twenty dollars for him?"

Max Bell was grinning. He said, "Ride him, Ben."

A little worried, Ben climbed into the saddle. Nothing happened. Noche stood perfectly still. He didn't break into a wild effort to throw him off and Ben's fears melted away. He rubbed a hand over Noche's mane. He said, "We'll get along, Noche. We'll get along." And he felt awfully good, sitting there on Noche's back, mounted for once on a real horse.

"Ride him, Ben," said Max Bell.

Ben nodded. He lifted the reins. He said, "Let's go, Noche."

But still nothing happened. Noche stood motionless.

Ben shook the reins. He touched Noche lightly with his heels. He said more sharply, "Let's go, Noche. Come on boy. Move!"

Every man Ben could see was grinning and Ben knew immediately that he had been rooked. These fellows who had come with Pedro had come here to enjoy just what was happening. They knew things about Noche which he didn't know.

Ben slapped Noche smartly on the flank. He dug his heels into the mustang's sides. He shouted. "Move, Noche! Move!"

For one horrible moment Ben thought Noche was rooted to the ground, that he would never move. But the moment passed. Finally, and reluctantly, it seemed, Noche started forward. At the gate he lifted to a trot, moving straight ahead. Ben moved the reins to guide him to the left, but Noche didn't turn. He fought the pull of the reins, veering slightly, but still keeping ahead.

Ben's lips tightened. He braced his feet in the stirrups and hauled Noche into a turn, making it finally, and scowling and thinking he could hear the sound of laughter behind him. But making it.

"You're going to learn, Noche," he growled under his breath. You're going to learn."

They were angling toward the main street, now, but not enough to make it. Ben once more pulled on the reins to swing Noche that way and again Noche fought his direction. Ben jerked. He reared back, gripping the reins, and Noche wheeled and started off at a different angle, but not toward town.

Sawing on the reins, fighting the horse constantly, Ben finally got him headed in the right way, and then relaxed. He pulled up in front of the Adobe saloon. Pulled up, but once more for an instant he was afraid Noche wasn't going to stop, even with his chin hauled back against his chest.

A grinning crowd was there to greet him. As weary as though after a long ride, Ben hitched the stallion to the tie-rail and then faced these men, his face for once a little drawn. Unfriendly.

"All right, tell me about him," he said bluntly.

"He's a fine bit of horse-flesh," said one of the men. "Really something to look at And he's fast, Ben. As fast as any horse in the country, but don't ever enter him in a race."

"Why?"

"Like as not, he'd run the wrong way. There's nothing up here." The man touched his head.

"You mean he hasn't been trained," said Ben.

"I mean he hasn't been and can't be. Joe Olmstead worked with him for six months and gave it up as a bad job. There's not a better man with horses any place, than Joe."

Everyone was nodding, and now others contributed their parts to the story of Noche. A wonderful horse. But no good. Dumb. Unpredictable.

"You can ride him if you want to, Ben," said Max Bell who had joined this group, "but if you start out for the Quemados you may end up in the desert. Or if you head for the desert, Noche might want to ride in the hills. And he would. You can saw on the reins until his mouth bleeds, but it means nothing to him. He's got his own ideas about where he wants to go. Or maybe no ideas at all. Maybe he doesn't understand what reins and a bit were made for. Maybe he's just what they call him. Noche, the Dumb."

There was a general laugh at this, and Ben joined in it with the others. He could take a joke, and that's what his purchase of Noche amounted to.

"Anybody want to buy a horse?" he asked, his eyes twinkling.

"You'll discover you can't even give him away," said Max Bell. "But come on inside. I'll buy you a drink."

IN THE days which followed, Ben discovered that all Max Bell had said was true. He couldn't sell Noche. He couldn't give him away. The horse was too well known. Others besides Joe Olmstead had tried to break him to some kind of practical use, but without success. Ben tried it, even though he knew very little about horses. A good many times in the late afternoons he saddled and mounted Noche and tried to ride him. And of

course riding him was easy, but never in the direction he wanted to go. Noche picked his own directions. Sawing on the reins made him more stubborn.

"I'm going to get on him and let him run, someday," Ben said to Max Bell. "I'll pack some food and several canteens of water and just give him his head. Where do you reckon I'll end up?"

"Canada," said Max Bell. "Or Mexico. Or maybe back East. We'll miss you, Ben. I wouldn't do it if I was you."

Max Bell was joking of course. But Ben wasn't joking. He was serious. He thought if he someday let Noche run himself out, the black might then be ready to answer the tug of a rein. Or at least, it was worth the try. And it would be interesting to see where Noche would take him. From anyplace they ended up, he could always get back, even if he had to hike part of the way.

"How about it, Noche?" he said one morning to the black. "Would you like travel? Would you really like to go someplace without me hauling on the reins and shouting at you?"

Noche tossed his head and whinnied, almost as though he understood. And Ben, chuckling, rubbed his hand over the black's glossy skin. Here, really, was a horse. And if he could solve the riddle of Noche's stubbornness, he could never ask for one finer.

"We'll try it, Noche," he said slowly. "We'll ride. Anywhere you want to go."

Ben packed the saddle bags with food and several canteens of water, which would be handy if Noche should head for the desert. He tied on a blanket roll and then mounted and said, "We're off, Noche. Show me the way."

Ben said later that he didn't once touch the reins during the day-long ride which followed. He admits he was a little excited when they started out for it was like setting off on an adventure into the unknown. And the next day, in the Adobe saloon, he told what had happened. He put it like this:

"Noche headed out through the gate and took off toward Bull hill. He ran that way for maybe five miles, then veered east and for a time, zig-zagged, and beyond the hog-back, turned south. He kept straight south to the river. I thought the river might turn him east but he plunged right in, forded it, and angled up Benton creek.

"Now and then he would stop and shake his head from side to side as though puzzled because I wasn't jerking on the reins. Always before, when there was a man on his back, he had to fight the pull of the reins. This time it wasn't happening, and I don't think he understood it.

"Maybe thirty miles south and east of here he turned into the foot hills of the Quemado mountains and climbed to Red Horse mesa. And he kept stopping occasionally to shake his head and look back at me. Whenever that happened I always said, *"Come on, Noche. Let's go someplace."* And then I'd slap him on the flank and he'd move on.

"We climbed into the Quemados, up a canyon I'd never seen before. We turned off in another canyon, narrow and brush filled and almost impassable, and at a clearing, Noche stopped. Something had frightened him. I don't know what it was. He stood perfectly still for a moment. I could feel him trembling. And then, with no other warning, he exploded into action and at the first pitch of his body I went sailing out of the saddle.

"When I fell I struck my head on a rock and for a while was unconscious. And when I awoke, Noche was gone. He had tossed me off and left and I was miles up in the hills. Miles from the nearest ranch on Red Horse mesa. Without food or water.

"I sat there for a while, cursing myself for a fool. A blue jay in one of the trees sang his mocking song and seemed to be laughing at me. I was sitting in what had once been an old creek bed and I reached for a rock to throw at the jay. But I didn't throw it. Here is the rock I picked up."

Ben took it out of his pocket, and everyone hearing his story crowded closer to see what he was holding. It was a gold nugget, almost the size of a hen's egg."

THERE was a rush to the Quemados back of Red Horse mesa. Every foot of what Ben named Twenty Dollar creek was staked and searched, as well as other dry creeks in the area. Several men made small fortunes in the gold they found, but Ben Heberton had the garden spot. Ben cleaned up more than forty thousand dollars in gold in the claim he worked. Forty thousand in a week. And no one begrudged him his luck. Even those who failed to find any color were glad that Ben had struck it rich. It couldn't have happened, they said, to a better guy, or to one who deserved it more.

And Ben, to whom money had never meant anything, was as happy as a kid over his good fortune. For it meant something more than dollars in the bank. It meant that now he could go out to the Jelliffe ranch and look Frank Jelliffe straight in the eye and say, "Molly won't have to slave after she marries me. I've got the money to support her. I've got the security you feel she needs. I made a twenty dollar investment in Noche and it paid off."

Ben had promised Ollie Knobbs to look after the hotel, nights, during the following week while Ollie made a trip to San Esteban. He would have been paid for this and could have used the money, but it seemed foolish to do it now. He talked to Ollie about this and Ollie seemed to understand. He said he would get someone else to help him out. And it also seemed foolish to go on with his school across the river.

Ed Simons had been talking to him about the investment of his money and the income to be made from loans he might approve. A decision on loans would take time and visits to the properties involved, and someone else could be hired to run the school. Ben met with some of the Mexicans across the river and explained things, and they, too, seemed to understand. As soon as possible, Ben promised, he would find someone to take over the school.

All at once he was busy. Ben Heberton, who had never been busy in his life, now found each hour of each day filled with problems. Under Ed Simons' direction, he made loans and took mortgages. He bought an interest in the feed store and the stage line, and as part owner of these enterprises, grew involved in their operations.

A month passed and another. Ben made several trips to the Jelliffe ranch on a new horse he had bought, one which followed the guiding of his hand. He saw Molly on only one of these visits, and as it happened, Bill McAdams was there at the time. Bill McAdams, who was tall, slender, young, had a grinning, sun-tanned face and rusty hair and who couldn't keep his eyes off Molly. He also seemed wholly unimpressed by Ben's good fortune.

Bill McAdams, of course, didn't have a chance with Molly. Ben could be sure of that. McAdams was only a hired hand on one of the mesa ranches. He had no way of providing for a wife.

He had no such ability as Ben had discovered in himself. Already, the money Ben had made on Twenty Mile creek had been increased through his investments. And it would increase more. Ben could see that in the plans formulating in his mind. Plans for the damming of the river and an irrigation system and the sale of water. Plans for the development of the stage line. For a new store. Another saloon. And he could finance all that and even other enterprises as his fortune grew.

Ben Heberton had changed. Without being aware of it, he had changed. His grin was gone. A scowl had taken its place. He didn't spend his evenings hanging around town any more. Usually in the evening he was working, discussing investments with Ed Simons or studying cost sheets at the stage office. An increase in freight and passenger rates was already bringing in more money for the stage line. Various economies could add to that.

Ben's farm and ranch loans had been in an area which Simons, as a conservative banker, didn't want to touch. But

they had been safe enough and brought in a high interest rate. And thus far, Ben hadn't lost on any of them.

"I took one bit of business away from you," Simons said one night. "A loan I might not have touched if I wasn't sure of the man. Bill McAdams is pretty steady."

"Who?" asked Ben sharply.

"Young Bill McAdams. He's a rider for Ordway. He's going to buy the Ainley ranch. He needs a thousand dollars more than he's been able to save up."

"And you've loaned it to him?"

"Not yet. But I told him I would."

"Then tell him you won't."

"What's that, Ben?"

"Tell him you won't," said Ben Heberton. "Tell him you've changed your mind."

Ed Simons' eyes narrowed. He shook his head. He said, "I don't get it, Ben. The kid needs a lift. And he's good for it. The ranch he's buying is sound. Why should I change my mind?"

"Change it," said Ben, harshly. "Change it. That's all."

Ed Simons could be a stubborn man, and he was now. He shook his head once more. He said, "Ben, I run the bank and I make the decisions. Let's talk about the Norman property."

AND that was that, or at least Simons thought it was until the next afternoon when Ben came into the bank, his scowl darker than ever.

"Have you made that McAdams loan, yet?" Ben asked.

"Not yet," said Simons. "But I will."

Ben Heberton relaxed. "No, Ed," he said slowly. "You won't. Or if you do, you'll regret it. I'm selling my interest in the stage line. I'm raising money on half a dozen mortgages I own and I have the pledged word of six men to sell me their stock in the bank. In another week I'll be the majority stockholder, and if you make the loan to Bill McAdams, you'll be hunting a job."

Ed Simons smoothed his hand over his hair. "You mean that, Ben?"

"Yes," said Ben Heberton. "I mean it."

Simons nodded. He stood up and crossed to the window and stood there, his back to Ben. He stood there staring into the street and wondering, perhaps, what he could do without this job. And maybe wondering what would happen to the Camarillo country if the bank came under Ben's domination. For Simons, more than anyone else, knew the change that had come over Ben and what a sudden greed for money had done to him.

"Well?" Ben was asking.

"I'll not make the loan," said Simons, his voice bleak. "Any other orders, Mr. Heberton?"

Ben Heberton pulled in a deep breath. He wasn't very proud of himself, just then, but he had done what he had to do. He wanted Molly. He wanted Molly more than anything in the world, but for a time his interest in making money had blinded him to what had been happening. Bill McAdams, with the Ainley ranch, wouldn't be just a hired hand. He would be a man of property. A man who could ask Molly to marry him.

"Any other orders?" said Simons.

"Yes," said Ben. "One more. Jelliffe owes the bank money. Tell him you need it."

"But Jelliffe's good for his loan. You know it."

"Call his loan, Simons. Tell him to see me."

That was what you did with money. You made it work for you. You used it to buy what you wanted. It had taken Ben a long time to make such a discovery, but he had made it. And that night he sat in his home, a home he had once used rent free, but now owned. He sat and looked ahead, planning for the future.

One thing he would get settled at once. The question of Molly Jelliffe. He would first have a talk with her father. He wouldn't insist that Jelliffe pay his loan to the bank, of course. That is, he wouldn't insist if it wasn't necessary, if Jelliffe saw things his way and would speak to Molly, use his influence with her. Frank Jelliffe was a smart man. A man who could tell how the wind was blowing,

and what was to his advantage.

A knock on the door interrupted him. Ben answered it and stared out at the shadowy figure who stood on his porch. He recognized Pedro Laros.

"What is it?" he growled.

"I must come to you again, *mi amigo,*" said the Mexican. "I am once more having trouble of a financial nature."

"See me tomorrow," said Ben. "See me in my office."

He had an office, now. He was a man of importance.

"But my trouble will not wait," Pedro was saying. "It is of now, tonight, that I must have the money."

"No money, Pedro," said Ben sternly. "You must learn to depend on yourself."

"But it would not be a loan, what I ask," said Pedro. "It would be in the nature of a reward."

"A reward?" said Ben.

"*Si.* For I have found Noche. And at great trouble to myself, have taken him and have him safe."

Ben Heberton roared with laughter. He shook his head. "Not again, Pedro. Not again. What use would I have for a horse such as Noche?"

"You had use for him once," said Pedro.

"And does Noche know the way to another gold field?"

"Who knows, *mi amigo*? Who can tell where Noche might go? Who understands the mystery of the night, or its secrets?"

"You should have been a poet," said Ben.

But he wasn't laughing now. He owed his fortune to Noche. And for sentimental reasons, if for nothing more, he owed Noche a home.

"How much do you want?" he asked slowly.

"Like all men," said Pedro, "my wants are extensive. But for twenty dollars—"

Ben dug into his pocket. He handed twenty dollars to the man on the porch. He said, "Bring me Noche tomorrow."

NOCHE whinnied when Ben stepped out on the porch the next morning. He was tied to the hitching post near the gate. Pedro had brought him there early, and hadn't waited for Ben to get up.

No crowd from town was standing around to see how Ben would welcome home the horse which had brought him his fortune. If it had occurred to Ben to wonder about this he might have thought it strange but he was much alone these days. And too busy to look deeply into anything excepting those matters which might be to his financial advantage.

He walked out to where the horse was standing, rubbed his hand over the mustang's nose, and said, "Noche, remember me? We took a ride one day. Up into the hills. You pitched me head first at a fortune."

Noche reared away, tossing his head. He looked in good condition. His skin glistened in the bright light of the morning. Where he had been all these months, Ben didn't know, but he certainly hadn't been ill treated.

"Maybe we'll take another ride one of these days," said Ben. "How about it?"

It would be a crazy thing to do, of course, for what had happened before had happened through the purest chance. And could never happen again. But in spite of that, in spite of all his good judgment, Ben was aware of a sudden desire to saddle Noche and ride him again, to see where Noche would go. He stared at the mustang, feeling this drive and the excitement it brought.

He said again, "How about it, Noche? Would it be the hills again?"

Noche whinnied and danced around the post and seemed to look toward the rearing heights of the Quemado mountains.

No one saw Ben Heberton ride out of town on Noche that morning, but later, men heard about the trip, and how Noche headed east and then north over the hogback and then north and east across the Tiburon flats, a barren, desolate country, half desert in character. And they heard of how Ben tried to turn him back and how Noche, as always, fought the tug of the reins. And how he suddenly reared up and pitched Ben from the saddle.

There was no gold, this time, at the point where Ben had fallen. There was no blue-jay chattering in a tree when he awoke, no tree to shade him from the burning sun. He had brought water and food, but they were in the saddle bags on Noche's back, and Noche was gone. Nowhere, as far as he could see in any direction, was there a sign of the black mustang. Or of any house, or any living thing.

Ben climbed to his feet, wincing from a badly sprained ankle. There was a ranch house on the edge of these flats but it was fifteen miles from where Noche had thrown him. He had fifteen miles to cover on foot, with an ankle which would scarcely bear his weight.

He heard a warning rattle, the rattle of a coiled snake. Ben stood motionless, his eyes searching out the snake. It was two paces to his left. A safe distance. But in the miles which lay between him and the ranch house there might be a thousand more and his chances of threading his way between them were not good.

"And I came here for gold," said Ben bleakly. "I've been a fool. The stuff blinded me. If I ever get back—"

He sat down again, moving away from the snake. He could feel the sun burning against him and its smothering heat rising from the ground. His throat was parched already. Yet there was nothing to do but sit here and wait. Wait for darkness. It would be cooler, then, and the

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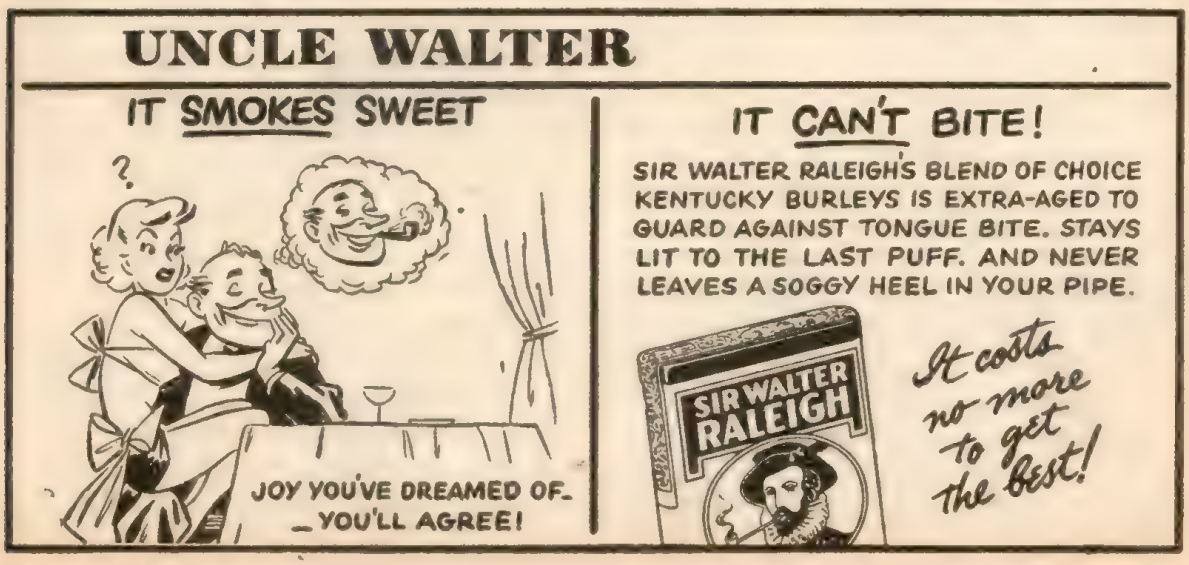
UNCLE WALTER
IT SMOKES SWEET
?
JOY YOU'VE DREAMED OF—YOU'LL AGREE!
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SIR WALTER RALEIGH
It costs no more to get the best!

snakes would be denned, unless he stepped on one he might pass them safely. That is, if he could walk at all. If his ankle would be able to bear the weight of his body.

Of his walk across the Tiburon flats, Ben never had much to say. Perhaps there was no story to it beyond the struggle it must have been. And it had been a struggle, but he made it, and after a three day rest at Sanderson's ranch house, he finally came in by wagon to Camarillo.

BY that time, he looked none the worse for his experience. But he had changed. Ed Simons, who hurried to his home to see him, was welcomed with a grin. And he noticed this for he had grown used to seeing a scowl on Ben's face.

"What have you done about that loan Bill McAdams wanted?" Ben asked.

"I turned him down," said Simons.

"Then get hold of him and tell him he can have the money," Ben ordered. "I reckon he'll be getting married one of these days, won't he?"

"It looks that way," said Simons, cautiously.

Ben nodded. "They'll make a fine couple, he and Molly. And another thing, Simons. Forget what I said about calling Frank Jelliffe's loan. And one thing more. Go on running the bank the way you've been running it. I'm going to be too busy to interfere."

"Busy doing what?"

"I never did get anyone to take over that school I started across the river," said Ben. "I sort of figure on reopening it myself, next week."

There was a knock on the door. Ben answered it. He stared at the man on the porch, and after a moment asked, "Well, Pedro?"

"I am once more," said Pedro, "in an embarrassing financial distress."

Ben scowled, then chuckled. He said, "Surely, Pedro. Surely. And at great trouble you have managed to find my horse, Noche. For twenty dollars which could be considered as a reward, you will be glad to return him to me. *No es verdad?*"

"Or even for ten dollars," said Pedro. "But Noche is such a splendid horse that twenty dollars does not seem unreasonable."

"Where did you find him?"

"I followed his trail, *mi amigo*, across the flats, as far as the Rim rock hills. Perhaps there is gold in those hills. Perhaps Noche—"

"Pedro," said Ben Heberton, "have you ever been high into the Quemados, beyond Sentinel peak, where the wild horses run?"

"Of a surety."

"Very well," said Ben. "Here is twenty dollars. And here is twenty more. You will take Noche to the country beyond Sentinel peak and leave him there. He should always have run wild."

"If that is your wish, *mi amigo*," Pedro nodded in agreement.

"It is," said Ben. "And Pedro, the next time you are in financial distress you must be sure to come to me. But not with Noche. Next time, come with your hammer and saw. There is work to be done on our school house across the river."

"Of a surety," said Pedro, but he sounded doubtful.

And Noche?

Noche the Dumb?

They say that for years he ran with the wild herds, high in the Quemado mountains. A black mustang stallion, swift as the wind. Horse hunters, attracted to the country and not knowing his story, made countless efforts to trap him, and later when talking about him in Camarillo would shake their heads at what they might be told.

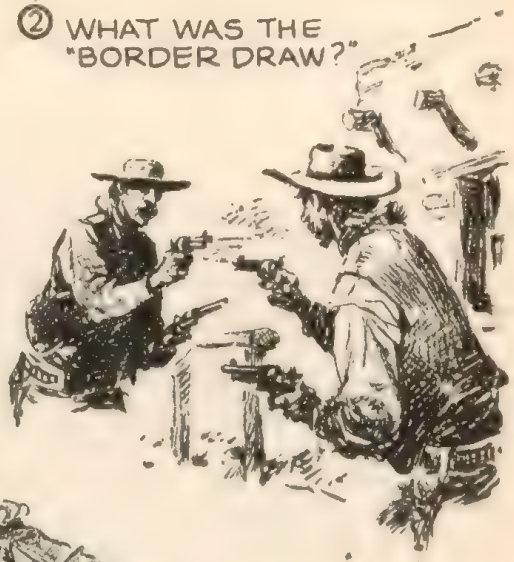
"Noche the Dumb?" they would ask. "Never. That black stallion is as smart as they make them. You folks have got him all wrong. You ought to call him Noche, the Wise."

And perhaps the horse hunters were right.

COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

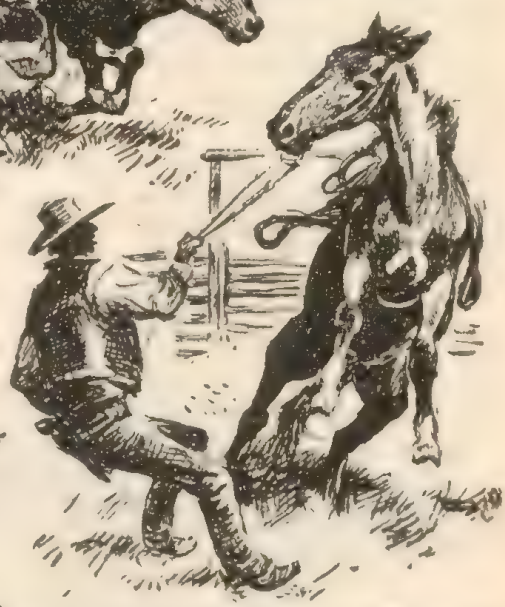
① IF YOU SAID A WESTERN HORSE WAS "LADY BROKE", WOULD THAT MEAN HE HAD BEEN TRAINED BY A FEMALE BRONC BUSTER?

② WHAT WAS THE "BORDER DRAW?"



③ HOW COULD A HORSE BE A "GOOD WHITTLER" WITHOUT A KNIFE?

④ WHAT IS A JUDAS STEER?



⑤ WHAT WAS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A "SALTY BRONC" AND A "SALTY RIDER?"

The Answers Are on Page 145—If You MUST Look!

AFTERMATH

When a traitor's bullet killed his bandit brother during a bank robbery, Ed Fenway resolved to cross up a double-crossing bunch!

I

DAD and I were burying a dead man at one corner of our fences, that hot afternoon in July. We were putting him down four feet, with double strands of barbed wire wrapped around the middle, and tamping the dirt hard with a heavy pounding bar. We could have used a three-foot length of mesquite instead of a concrete block, but Dad was a stickler for doing things right. I took the two loose ends of the wire stick up out of the ground and wrapped them around the top of the corner post.

I was twisting them tight to hold that corner post like a pillar when we heard Mom ringing the iron triangle, at the back of the house a quarter mile away. We both straightened and looked toward the white dot that was her apron over near the windmill and water tank.

Dad said, "I reckon we'd better lope over and find out what's up, Ed. She wouldn't be calling us otherwise."

We tossed our tools down beside the corner post with its new dead man anchor and went over and untied the ponies' reins from the top strand of the fence. I was proud of that fence and the one hundred and sixty acres it enclosed. We had cut them up into four fields and feed pastures. We owned the unfenced section south of us, too; four more years of hard work to look forward to with pleasure.

It's been said that there is not near so much pleasure in the possession of a thing as there is in the acquiring of it, and that's about the way Dad and I felt that afternoon about our irrigated fields and the pastures where bony, drought-starved two-year-olds we'd bought for feeders were eating their heads off and putting on poundage by the day.

We didn't owe anybody a dime, we were respected by our neighbors for hard work and regular attendance at church in town, and everything was

# of DEATH

A Novelet by WILLIAM HOPSON

Tess shook her head in despair

perfect. Except for one thing: my older brother, Claud.

Wild Claud Fenway, the newspapers called him.

We didn't say anything as we loped toward the house to where Mother was waiting in the back door, but I guess both of us were thinking the same thing as we swung down and let the reins trail. I was certain of it, certain that at last it had come, when I saw Mom's face.

MONTH after month for nearly two years we had been waiting and now it was over. That I could see, though her face was pretty calm. She was still a handsome woman at forty-four and somehow she'd managed not to look old and work worn like so many of our neighbor women folks.

"Well, Mom," I said. "It's Claud, isn't it?"

She had the dipper of cold water ready for Dad, as always, and she nodded as she handed it to him. "The sheriff just phoned, son. It happened this morning in a little town somewhere over in Arizona."

"Dead?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered and kind of choked up a little. "Bob"—she was speaking of Bob Hagerman, the sheriff—"didn't get many details in the telegram except that there were four of them, as usual, led by Claud. They tried to hold up a bank when it opened. Claud was killed."

Dad lowered the dripping tin dipper and tossed the rest of its contents through the open doorway and then dipped one for me from the big wooden bucket. He took off his hat and wiped at his forehead with a faded sleeve. Sweat glistened on his hairy chest above the opened front of the shirt, both of us wet beneath the armpits. All of a sudden he looked older than his forty-eight years.

But when he spoke his voice carried its usual mild tone. "Well, I don't suppose there's a great deal we of the rest of the family can do about it. We've known for a long time it would be either that or the penitentiary—or worse. The best thing is to let them bury him in an unmarked grave among strangers, and we'll bury all memories with him."

"Tom!" Mother cried out sharply. "He's still our son, remember? The boy you taught to ride and hunt and work?" She turned to me and I can still see the resolute look in her lead-gray eyes. "Ed, you go bathe and change clothes. If you hurry you can get the evening train west to Lordsburg. Wire them to hold the body until you arrive, and see that he gets a decent funeral. Just a plain stone with his name and the dates. He . . . he would have been twenty-five next month," and then she broke down completely. She buried her face in the apron and began to cry softly.

I put the dipper afloat in the bucket and looked at Dad. He nodded silently and I went into my room for clean clothes and then to the shower room out beneath the windmill water tank.

I beat the train into town by forty minutes and rode to the station. Red O'Keefe, the agent, who had delivered the telegram to the sheriff, tried hard to cover self-embarrassment while he wrote out the ticket and checked my grip. It was the same way at the livery where I left my horse. I walked up the street to the courthouse, aware that fifty pairs of eyes were expressing curiosity and pity. Two well meaning men stepped out with mutters and handshakes. I felt better when I was alone with tall Bob Hagerman in his office. He knew how to meet such situations.

He got up as I entered. He said, "There's not much I can tell you from the telegram sent by some deputy, Ed. Fellow named Cass Wentworth. Not much except that I'm glad it's all over for Claud. It'll be hard on your mother, of course, mothers being that way—thank God. But it's better for her this way, and better for me too, Ed. Ever since he killed his first man in a bank holdup eighteen months ago, you'll never know how many nights, month

after month, I've prowled Tom's barns and corrals looking for strange horses. He would have hung, Ed," he added simply.

I said, "I know that, Bob. So it's not necessary to make it easy for Dad and me. I'm taking the train over to put him away for Mom's peace of mind, and then it will be forgotten as quickly as possible. What's the name of that town?"

He picked up a telegram from his desk and handed it to me. "Place called Bayless, off the railroad a way. Northern part of Arizona Territory. If memory serves me right, it was the scene of a wild gold strike back in the Apache days until the mines finally played out. All cattle and sheep and lumber now, I think."

"One of those juicy little out-of-the-way banks ripe for the plucking, I suppose," I told him a little bitterly and crammed the yellow paper in a coat pocket of my brown suit. "Well, I'd better get down to the depot. See you in a few days, Bob."

"Hurry back home. And I won't walk down to the station with you. Too obvious."

I WAS at the door with a hand on the knob when he spoke again. He moved over toward me. "By the way, Ed, there's something I'd like to bring up, now that Claud is dead. I know how close you two kids were all your lives, even if he was the wild one of the family. I know that he didn't spend all the money he took from seven banks and that sixty thousand the four of them got out of that express car up in Wyoming. The Pinkertons are positive he didn't."

"And," I finished for him, "knowing how close we were, and Claud certain he'd get killed sooner or later, he wrote me the location where his share of the loot is cached, eh? Don't tell me you weren't sharp enough to steam open the half dozen scattered letters he wrote me during the last year and a half?"

"That's what puzzles me, Ed," he admitted. "Both me and the Pinkerton man. He discounted it but I didn't. I know you kids too well. Claud undoubtedly knew you wouldn't take the money, after you never tried to answer his letters. But I'll bet my last rock bottom dollar that he wanted you to know and got the information to you."

I said, "You forgot to watch Tessie Wright's mail, Bob. You know Tessie. Loose on morals but crazy about Claud since the first time they hit the brush together at fourteen. He sent it through her. I couldn't tell you, Bob, because I didn't want him killed in a stake-out or caught to be hung. Don't worry about his share of it. The law in Bayless will take care of everything. So long, Bob."

At daybreak the following morning the train made a waterstop at a box-car depot from where the telegram had been sent and, from among the dozen or less houses comprising the "town," I located a Mexican who owned a light rig and a roan and claybank span. His eleven-year-old boy, Pedro, went along to show me the way and to bring back the team. It was prosperous country that we drove through for four hours—Arizona high country of grassy knolls covered with evergreen pine and fir where cattle and sheep grazed fat and sleek in the luxuriant grass. We quartered down a long slope and into a lovely green valley where verdure long since had covered the ancient mine dumps, and it was easy to see why Claud and his three tough followers had hit the town.

There was a rich little bank and, in the timbered high country, a thousand virgin canyons where bandits could hide out. Rich and unprotected.

Yet something appeared to have gone very much wrong in Bayless the day before.

We struck the main road at the east end of town and clattered in at a brisk trot. The sky was clear but you could feel the coolness and smell those pines. The Mexican boy beside me in the open

seat stirred. He pointed to a small brick building on a corner.

"You see that bank, Meester Ed? Yesterday some very bad mans they try to steal the money and one *bandido* he is get dead."

I let that one go by and rattled the roan and claybank to a halt in front of a hotel directly across from the ill-fated bank. The boy said, "My fawther he tell to me maybeso you want to come back to the railroad. He tell to me maybeso I wait for you."

"Okay, Pete," I told Pedro. "Suit yourself."

I reached back to lift my grip from the floor of the hack and then didn't. A funeral cortege led by a hearse of uncertain vintage was pulling into view about one hundred yards away, followed by several buggies, a number of men and women horsemen, with a bunch of kids on ponies and burros bringing up the rear. People were filing out on the plankwalks now, standing grim-faced and silent. I sat there not knowing quite what to think or feel as the hearse came abreast with a driver in black up front. The ancient vehicle was a box-shaped affair with big glass windows on both sides, the wheel rims and spokes so fragile looking you wondered why they didn't collapse under the weight of the coffin visible inside.

The box appeared to have been handmade, but they had done a good job, covering it with blue velvet damask and adding plain iron handles on the sides.

I couldn't get it for a moment; something didn't jell. I thought, Since when in the hell does a bank robber rate a funeral like this one?

And then I saw the black veiled girl in a buggy directly back of the hearse and I did get it.

EVER since Claud and Tessie Wright had started hitting the brush back of the schoolhouse at fourteen, he'd been a holy terror with the girls; looking upon it as a game and them as legitimate prey. The easy ones like poor, loyal Tessie he took for granted; stalking them as ruthlessly as a bobcat after a crippled cottontail rabbit. It was the same with those not so easy. Whatever it took—patience, flattery, money, lies—he got them all. And I knew of a couple of others he had taken by force, knowing that shame would keep their mouths sealed.

This one was the different one I'd always known would one day fall afoul of his wild path: she'd loved him. That accounted for the cortege. They were her friends, not the friends of Wild Claud Fenway.

I took back the lines from Pedro's brown hands as the procession went on by. "Maybe you'd better stick around for awhile after all, Pete," I told him, pulling the span around.

We fell in on the tail end of the procession and followed at a plodding walk as it pulled out the west end of town and headed for a cemetery plot about one half mile away. Two riders clattered by and I heard one of them cursing, low, bitterly.

"To think," he snarled, "that it would have to happen to a kid like Helen. I'd like to take an ax and cut his damned carcass into a thousand pieces and burn them in a slow fire. That rat—that dirty, rotten murdering rat!"

I knew how he felt. The girl falling in love with my brother. But he didn't know how I felt at that moment. It wasn't good. After all, I'd have to meet her sooner or later and try to tell her how the family felt.

There were two cemeteries out there on the slope, side by side; one with the rusty remnants of a barbed wire fence, now mostly on the ground. In it were the remains of the early day miners and gamblers and gun-fighters; bones of bedraggled women who had sold themselves to any man who had the price; and four Apache Indians killed in a drunken spree. Those and many others had been caught in the roar of a boom that had swept briefly down the valley; they had been left behind in its wake.

The other cemetery was newer and enclosed inside a white picket fence. I sat there back of the plodding team, wondering if they'd bury in the new plot or over in the old, where my brother really belonged. They pulled through the wide swung gates of the new one.

I was tying the team to the fence when a big horse loped by and a man with a deputy's pentacle on his shirt front looked down from a pair of eyes that were dark and sharp and mean looking. And that in itself came as a mild sort of shock. You see, over home in New Mexico, the only officers I'd ever known were men like Bob Hagerman and predecessors of the same kind of man. They had been friendly and honest and easy going, men who had gone out of their way to keep others, like even Claud, my brother, out of trouble. Respected men who played it on the level and had few enemies.

So it was with a bit of misgivings that I saw this mean-eyed little wart give me that look as he spurred past and through the gates. I followed with Pete tagging along barefooted.

Four ranchers had lifted the coffin from the back end of the hearse and placed it on two-by-fours over the open grave and then slipped lowering lariats beneath both ends and laid them on the ground. A mixed choir from the local church was intoning a hymn while the minister stood with head bowed. When it was over, he began to talk, saying things about mankind being good, God and His forgiveness, and the rest of it that we ordinary folks feel inside but seldom are able to put into words.

I stood there on the outskirts of the crowd and watched the veiled girl, handkerchief to her mouth and her eyes riveted on the blue coffin. I kept thinking that had I known anything like this would happen, Ed Fenway never would have left home on the train.

From beside me came the jangle of big spurs and I looked down into the close set eyes of the wart-sized deputy. Even with his hat off and held over his left breast, there was no pious expression on his face. He wasn't capable of it. Not his kind.

"They're giving him a good funeral," I whispered behind a hand while the minister talked on.

"Uh-huh. Well, they should. He was a good little feller."

"He *what*?" I almost hissed in astonishment. "Look, mister, just *who* are they burying here anyhow?"

He shot me an upward look that was both cunning and triumphant. He nearly smirked. "The father of Helen Carter, that girl there in black. Your brother shot him just before I killed your brother. Better see me right after the funeral, Mr.—*Fenway*!"

II

I TURNED on my heel and put on my hat, feeling all sick inside. Bob Hagerman hadn't said anything about anybody else getting killed in that attempted bank hold-up. With Pete trotting alongside I headed downslope to the gate.

"Hey, Meester Ed," the kid broke in. "When Deputy Wentworth, he come to the ralroad yasterday, he tell to the peoples only the *bandido* is died and one other man he is hurt. Now this other man is died, no?"

I said yes and went out through the gate to the tie rope.

That was about the gist of it, and I'd been very much mistaken about that girl having been in love with Claud, thank God. She hadn't been another of his conquests after all. She was apparently the daughter of someone in the bank, and my brother had shot her father during the attempted hold-up.

I drove back to town at a fast clip. I needed time to think.

Men were still on the street when Pete and I reached the hotel. They were staring hard at me now, and it didn't take a second guess to know why. Although Claud had been two years older than myself, we almost could have

passed for twin brothers. That was why that wart-sized deputy had known my name. It was why they were staring now. There was nothing to do but make the best of it.

I rolled around the corner of the hotel and pulled up in front of a livery gate in a vacant lot out back. I said, "Pete, you take care of the team while I get a room for us. Bring the grip in and take it upstairs."

He grinned as only a Mexican kid can grin, jumped down and took the lines. "Hokay, Meester Ed. My fawther, who is also my papa, he is going to be glad I make much money."

The hotel was one of those box-shaped affairs built by men who knew only enough to make it square and two-story. The buxom woman who handed me the steel pen tried to appear impersonal when I signed the register *Edward Fenway & Pete.* I paid her, told her to give the key to Pete, and asked where the undertaking parlor was located. She said up the street a few doors to the hardware store and I walked out and passed men who stared off in stony silence and did not meet my eyes.

A middle-aged clerk wearing gold-rimmed glasses led me back past a maze of racks loaded with harness and saddles and a big pile of rock salt for cattle. We went through into a sort of carpenter shop. There was a coffin on two saw horses, all done up in white, and I went over and looked down through the glass. A very old lady was inside, looking tired, as though she'd just fallen asleep and had not awakened again.

"Over there," the clerk said, pointing. "We froze a tarp in a winter ice house and wrapped him up in it."

He went out again with a sort of bored indifference and I stepped over to the long bundle laid out on a big table and unwrapped the larger end.

He hadn't changed a great deal in nearly two years except that his face looked older; drawn and off color. His eyes were closed in a tight squint and his lips beneath the brown mustache that had been pressed hard against the lips of a hundred different women and girls were all twisted. He hadn't shaved in at least two weeks. It was all there in his harsh face. The whole story. The women he had loved briefly and lied to, the whisky he had drunk, the men he had murdered, the sorrow he had caused, and the grief he had brought home to his mother.

He was wrapped to the chin in a thick cover of white bandages, with a trace of red at the edges. Deputy Sheriff Cass Wentworth had shot him dead center.

Outside the back door a rig rattled up and presently the man in black who had driven the hearse, opened the door and came in.

"Ah, yes," he said almost absently, coming over. "You're a relative, of course. I see the family resemblance. Do you—ah—wish him prepared for shipment?"

I was finishing closing up the head end of the bundle again. I said, "Bury him. In the tarp. And put him over in the old graveyard—where he belongs."

His face fell and still was all the way at the bottom when I paid him the twenty-five dollars; and if he hadn't been about to cry from disappointment, I wouldn't have added the rest: "And don't put him too near those old bawds out there. He might come alive again."

HIS mouth was still open in horrification when I went out. Somehow I felt much better. At least for the moment.

Off the lobby of that box-shaped monstrosity was a narrow bar room running back some thirty or forty feet. I pushed in through the slatted swing doors and the place chilled into silence. I thought, All right, damn you, freeze up because I'm his brother. I was beginning to get a bit sore.

The bartender turned out to be the husband of the buxom proprietoress. He looked at me as though my tongue was sharp, too. "Whisky?" he inquired.

"My brother, Claud Fenway, always

drank my share of it," I told him. "Did you see the hold-up yesterday?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Fenway, I did. First thing of its kind that's happened here since the mines played out some thirty odd years ago." He waved a vague hand toward, I supposed, the distant valley side.

"Just what did happen?"

"Wel-l-l," he began and glanced at the others. "Helen and Lawrence—that's her father—come down to the bank at nine to open up as usual, old man Henneford who owns it, not gettin' down till around ten or so. I'd just opened up myself. Next thing I knew these four fellers come out of nowhere and stopped in front of the place across the street. Three went inside while the other held the horses. First off there was a shot. Next thing I heard was Helen scream. Then they come running out of the bank while your—uh—brother was hollering for 'em to hit leather. About that time Cass Wentworth—he's our deputy here—let go with a repeater from across the street and killed your brother, Mr. Fenway. I guess that's about all." He looked at the others as though pleading for moral support.

I said, "That sounds like about half of it. Did Wentworth wound any of the others, or anything?"

"Couldn't tell, Mr. Fenway. I ducked. But there was a lot of shooting from both sides when they hit for the timber. Wasn't many fellers in town that time of the morning to make up a posse so Cass burned the breeze to the railhead station and got busy on the telegraph wires to all officers up and down the line. Maybe these other fellers in here could tell you more."

"I'll ask Wentworth," I said.

"Ask him what?"

"Where he learned to shoot a rifle," I said and went out from chill silence that you could have cut with a dull bitted pole-axe.

Now that the body of Lawrence Carter had been lowered into the outer box and the lid screwed on, the crowd was beginning to straggle back, leaving the diggers to complete the burial. The buggy with that black-veiled girl in the back seat trotted by and for one brief moment her eyes locked with mine, and I thought, Poor youngster, I don't blame you. I'd hate Ed Fenway, too. Fenway and his family and all the ancestors that had produced the man who killed your father.

Cass Wentworth beckoned from across the street.

I stepped off the plank walk and crossed to the opposite side. Being of small stature and riding a very large horse, he looked like an oversized child up there in the saddle—a button-eyed child with a black mustache, wearing a gray shirt, tan pants, and boots whose tops came up to the knees. He had on big spurs and a gun at his hip. I began to get ideas about this Cass Wentworth as he paced me up the boardwalk to a small building of one story where his office was located. I was certain of it when he swung out of the saddle. He

BONANZA KING

BANKER by profession but a gambler at heart, the famous financier, Darius Ogden Mills, began accumulation of his vast fortune in 1850 when he took a wagon load of supplies to Stockton, California, where illy-equipped goldseekers fought for a chance to purchase the materials at several times their original value.

With proceeds of the sale, Mills began buying gold in a tent at the boom-town of Columbia. From this lowly estate, he graduated to banking and eventually to important holdings in Nevada's fabulous Comstock Lode, also owned half a dozen railroads and other assorted enterprises. After four generations the Mills' fortune is still largely intact, thereby refuting the old adage of "three generations from shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves."

—*Sam Brant*

looked bigger now; bigger and deadly.

We went inside and he nodded toward a chair and sat down back of his desk, tossing his hat on a small table. His hair was thick and crinkly.

"I hope," he said, "that there ain't any hard feelings because of what I had to do, Mr. Fenway."

"On the contrary, you did my family a favor," I said.

"Well! I'm sure relieved to hear that. I was worried."

He didn't look it.

"What do you plan to do with the body?"

"Bury it."

CASS WENTWORTH stirred in his chair and leaned back and put those small boots with the big spurs on a corner of his desk. He reached for papers and tobacco, the button eyes speculative. Whatever was on his mind he was taking his time. He offered the sack and then withdrew it when I told him I didn't smoke.

He said, exhaling twin streams of gray from his nostrils, "I suppose you want to know the details?"

"I've heard most of them," I told him. "But there's a couple of things you might fill in. Just wanted to know how come you were posted across the street with a repeater at the right time. Just wondering how you made such a dead shot on a five-thousand-dollar bounty and then missed three others."

He didn't move but his whole body went rigid and the shoe-button black eyes began to burn holes through me. He said coldly, "You getting some ideas, mister?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then don't. Your job was to come down here and take care of him and pick up his personal effects. That gunbelt there on the rack and a purse with eight dollars in silver. Here's the purse. Finish up your business and go back where you belong. I took care of one. This country is covered with posses and they'll get the other three."

Without removing his feet he bent forward and opened a drawer and tossed a worn leather snap purse. I got up and lifted the gunbelt from the rack. Dad had bought identical ones for Claud and me just ten years before, and taught us how to use them. He'd never let us make fools of ourselves by wearing them into town, but he figured that a man should be able to defend himself, and he hated prairie dogs and coyotes worse than he hated a rattler. I slung on Claud's gunbelt and dropped the purse into a coat pocket.

"I'll go when he's buried and a stone put up and some other business has been completed, Mr. Wentworth. That includes seeing Helen Carter, to try to make her understand how the family feels."

I abhor a man who leers. It's a mark of low animal cunning, and this little black-eyed wart actually leered at me. "Nice stuff there. A little uppity because Lawrence was a school teacher back in the Middle West. Bad lungs or something."

"Meaning," I sneered at him, "that you didn't get very far with her and it hurts. It hurts bad because you're a little man trying to be a big man and can't quite make it."

The shot went home so hard you could hear the wind suck in through his nostrils. He lowered those small boots and big spurs to the floor and got up and the cigarette fell from his fingers while his eyes continued to burn into mine.

"Don't you ever again say that," he almost whispered. "If you *ever* speak those words to me again or to anybody in this town, I'll kill you, Fenway!"

I grinned at him and walked to the door. Beside it was tacked a big poster with Claud's picture in the center and three smaller ones below. Joe Chadwick. Mark Eggers. Hal Thompson. All of them were under the age of twenty-five; tough, callous, reckless. Take it with a gun—ride hard—spend fast. Whisky and loose women.

Claud hadn't spent his. Not all of it.

III

GOING back to the hotel I automatically removed from the .44 the shell that had fatally wounded Lawrence Carter and as automatically cleaned and oiled the weapon with some rags and oil obtained downstairs. And I knew what rumors *that* would start. Pete was gone. The trip over, and a chance to sleep in a hotel between clean sheets for the first time in his life, was the biggest thing that ever happened to the youngster. He was out with a mixed group of Mexican and Anglo kids, hanging around the back of the undertaker's coffin and carpenter shop, waiting for the funeral to start.

They buried the tired old lady that afternoon and then went over into the old plot and dug a new one for Claud. I'd have to have the stone cut and shipped out from Lordsburg. I finished with the gun, borrowed an iron from Mrs. Clarke—she of the big bosom—and carefully pressed the brown suit. I shaved and bathed and at dusk went down to the small dining room. The dozen or so men and women sat quietly at their tables as I entered, and over in a corner with his back to the walls Cass Wentworth shot me a sharp glance from the button eyes and then wiped at his mustache before resuming his meal. Pete was gorging himself in the kitchen.

I was in the lobby, roaming a toothpick from one lip corner to the other, when a very large and tall man stepped through from the bar. He was one of those old-timers of which there are a thousand like him in any big county and yet with a personality all his own. He was well dressed and sported a flowing white mustache—an old time cowman, mining man, turned banker.

He stuck out his hand. "Mr. Fenway? I'm Jim Henneford, the banker here. Would you care to have a drink with me, sir?"

I said, "I'll settle for a cigar if you don't mind, Mr. Henneford."

"Good. Come along."

We went inside to the bar. Among three or four others lining it was a youngish fellow who evidently had been riding hard. He gulped down a final double slug of whisky, wiped at his mouth, and came over. He said, "Well, Jim, I've got to get a fresh hoss and get back with word to the sheriff. We're still swinging on a two hundred mile circle to hook up with some other posses. They've got eighty Apache trailers off the reservation from White River. Those bandits can't get away this time."

He shot me a curious look and went out, and the beat of his horse's hoofs came back from the darkness outside. I tucked the cigar into the inside pocket of my coat. Henneford said, "I want you to know, sir, that I understand everything. A good family and a boy who went bad. I got my start as a gambler here during the mining boom, thirty odd years ago, and stayed on after the boom went bust. I saw them bury others just like him out there in the old cemetery; them and the worn out money girls and the four Apaches who went on a spree and were shot down for the sport of it by a bunch of whooping miners. It was tough for Lawrence to lose his life, but if it will make you feel any better, he was about gone anyhow. I gave him the job to help him keep his self-respect, and Helen knew it."

"It was still cold-blooded murder because he wouldn't open the vault," I said flatly; and then: "About the girl, Mr. Henneford. Should I go see her tonight or wait?"

He looked at me out of a pair of clear blue eyes undimmed by age. "She's got courage, young fellow. More in that small body of hers than we've got. Yes, go see her—if you're not afraid of Cass Wentworth. Cass is small, too, but he runs this town with an iron hand, and he usually gets what he wants."

I left him and went out into the night, crossed over and walked up the street past the bank, like he'd told me. The

stars were out and it was cool. Claud's gun on my hip felt good. If I knew Cass Wentworth, he'd want to ask questions about Claud's cache. He'd try to find out before I left Bayless.

IN THE darkness the two trees loomed up. Two evergreens just inside the gate on each side of the walk, and needing only lights to turn them into Christmas trees. I went in between them and to the porch of a very small house of not more than three rooms. The kind where two people like Helen Carter and her sick father would live. An elderly woman opened the door at my knock.

I asked, "Mrs. Carter?"

"There is no Mrs. Carter," she said. "Miss Carter is here. Just a minute."

She closed the door and then it soon opened and I caught a glimpse of Helen Carter's face and the backs of two women making hurried exits through the kitchen door. I stood there, tall and awkward, and I guess she sensed it because she said, "Come in. It's Mr. Fenway, isn't it?"

The front room was small with plain furniture and in one corner was a big handmade couch which I guessed had been Lawrence Carter's bed by night and a place of rest during sick spells. She took my hat and I saw that all traces of grief had been washed away from the surface. Her blonde hair, braided and coiled around her small head, shone in the lamp light. I sat down and I still couldn't find words to say what I felt.

She sensed it and spoke instead; gently. "I think I know why you came. It's because of what—happened, of course."

"If I had known beforehand, I'd have brought my mother along, Miss Carter. She could have done a better job of telling you what we've gone through the past eighteen months. Waiting for news and dreading for it to come. She could have told you how we feel now. I can't put it in words."

"It won't be necessary," she answered and smiled with that gentleness that seemed to be so much a part of her.

Well, that kind of broke the ice, and pretty soon I found myself telling her about the family and Claud and the days when we were kids together; Claud and I and Tessie Wright. I had to gloss over about poor Tessie. You didn't tell a woman like Helen about a big overgrown, chubby girl of thirteen all of a sudden blossoming out overnight into a full blown woman a year later and causing even the older boys who had left school to nudge one another and grin when she passed. We talked for two hours and then it was time to go.

She brought my hat and looked up at me as I took it. "I suppose you'll be leaving soon?" she asked.

"About tomorrow, Helen," I said. "And you?"

"Not for awhile. I need time to realize that Lawrence must be left here alone. I must wait, Ed."

"Now that Lawrence Carter is gone, Cass Wentworth won't wait," I said sharply.

She flashed me a startled look. Little Poker Face had been unmasked. The shot had caught her off balance and her eyes bared the fear I knew was inside of her. "How did you know?" she almost whispered.

I said, "Cass Wentworth won't wait," and went to the door and heard it close behind me. I stood there for a moment getting my eyes adjusted to the darkness; feeling her closeness as she'd looked up, remembering how the light had shone on her hair, and experiencing a strange tingling that was alien inside of me.

Off the porch reality came back and brought the frown again. Cass Wentworth. He had shot a man dead center through the neck and then missed three riders and horses at close range. Five thousand dollars worth, express company money. Somehow Cass Wentworth had known—he *must* have known—of the impending holdup. But, if so, how? I had asked Helen about strangers in town, and they had been of the usual

type, a few grub line punchers, some of which might have been members of Claud's outfit; drummers and wagon peddlers; a new waitress at the hotel for a short while. People such as that.

Something didn't fit and, because of Helen Carter, I intended to bury Claud on the morrow and then find out why. I went back to the hotel.

PETE hadn't come in yet. Mrs. Clarke, obviously miffed at the thought of him sleeping in one of her beds, said that "that Mexican" was out romping the town with a bunch of "mean young 'uns." I went on upstairs and along the corridor to our rear corner room. Pete wasn't in all right, but the room was not unoccupied. There was a woman lying on the bed. She was a brown haired woman in boots and split riding skirt and whose large, firm breasts showed plainly through the thin, rumpled white waist. She uncovered her left arm from across her eyes and looked up and smiled wanly and said, "Hello, Ed."

I took off my hat and sat down on the edge of the bed beside her and she moved over a bit to make more room. It opened the blouse wider but she didn't seem to mind. She was past caring now—not that she ever had cared much.

I said, "I guess I'm not too surprised, Tessie. Everybody back home sort of figured that you went to him when you disappeared. What's the deal now?"

She roused herself and sat up beside me, pulling the blouse front more into place and tucking in a stray wisp of hair. She was tired looking and drawn but she still had that lusciousness about her that attracted men.

"I don't know, Ed," she replied in a voice that was as tired as the look on her face. She took out tobacco sack and began to build a brown paper cigarette. "I knew you'd come and I just had to talk to you. Came up the back way. I worked here for a short time as a waitress, you know."

So that was it? The waitress Helen had mentioned. Working all day long in the dining room downstairs must have made it pretty easy for her to line up things for Claud and his three wild young followers. She must have known what I was thinking for she said, licking at the paper, "Yes," dully, "I did it for Claud because I could never refuse him anything since we were kids in school together. But he didn't know about the cross-up with Cass Wentworth and neither did I—until it was too late."

"Just keep right on talking," I encouraged her, my insides all cold now.

She took a match from a pocket of the rumpled white blouse, struck it across a boot sole man fashion, and lit the cigarette. She inhaled deeply, once, and then removed it and looked at me.

"I came in here and went to work and fixed this job all up for Claud and his boys. But his nerves were getting shot from whisky and the Pinkertons and the big reward they'd put on his head. He knew it was just a matter of time—and that he'd hang when it came. Hang or get shot down. He couldn't sleep, and I guess that me being in camp with three women hungry men didn't help things either. I think they were planning to kill him anyhow because of me. I was certain of it when he said this hold-up would be his last before he and I headed for Mexico. There always has to be a last time, doesn't there?" she added and smiled again, the bitter smile of a woman who has lost everything.

She took a drag at the cigarette again and went on. "Hal Thompson was the one who suggested this place. I didn't know why until after—it happened. Cass Wentworth, the deputy, is his cousin. The deal between them was for Wentworth to kill Claud for the reward plus Claud's fourth of the bank money. He was to stay here until the reward is paid, then resign and set himself up ranching with the Carter girl. But the deal didn't work out. That little fellow in the bank wouldn't open the vault and Hal shot him dead just as Claud shot

into the floor at his feet. So it fizzled and the boys came back. And because Claud was now dead they—they—"

She dropped the cigarette to the floor and two large tears formed slowly and rolled down her cheeks as she looked at me. Pleadingly. "What am I going to do, Ed?" she whispered. "Ed, what am I going to do now?"

I said as gently as possible, "I don't think you can go back home again, Tess, because your folks are a whole lot like mine. But you're only twenty-four and young enough to start over again. Forget Claud. He paid back all you gave willingly by wrecking your life over where you lived. He was no good and we both know it. Get on your horse and ride out, Tess. And send me word if you ever need help. It's just a matter of time until Apache trailers pick up the tracks and you don't want to be around."

She rose and instinctively squashed out the dropped cigarette with the toe of a boot. She said, "There won't be any tracks. They're holed up in an old mine tunnel a half mile south of town. Horses and all. I slipped away while they were playing cards."

IV

AFTER motioning with my head for her to leave, I blew out the lamp and followed into the darkness of the hallway end. We opened the back door and went down the outside stairs a slow step at a time until we reached the rutted alley. A horse stamped restlessly over in the hotel's corral and from somewhere nearby came the rising cresendo of two caterwauling cats snarling through the preliminaries before one either broke to run or elected to stand and fight. Boyish whoops floated to us from the distance and I thought I recognized Pete's jeering voice.

We walked toward the corner of the corral where her horse was tied, neither of us saying anything. I guess we were thinking of those days in the past when we had all been kids together; and now Claud was dead, Tessie heading out alone, and me facing the job of flushing three tough young desperados out of a rabbit warren of mine tunnels. The cats were still squalling and the horse over in the corral stamped again. We reached the big bay she had ridden in. I untied him and handed her the reins.

I said gently, "I guess this is good-by, Tess. Stop off at some ranch house and get supplies for the first couple of hundred miles and then get a stage or train. If you run into a posse, they can't prove anything. Do you need any money?"

She shook her head in the night. Then, before I realized what had happened, she reached up and pulled my head down and kissed me on the mouth. Hard. I heard her voice, low and soft. "I always liked you more than you ever knew, Ed. And tonight I'd give whatever little soul I have left if it had been you instead of Claud. Good-by, Ed."

She reached for the stirrup with one hand and another hand clamped itself around the back of my neck—a hand so large that the fingers lapped around into my throat.

Something exploded on the back of my head and that's all I remember.

A bucket of cold water in my face started lightning flashes inside my eyelids and from far away came bawls of coarse laughter. I looked up at mine timbers overhead and then a man with a bucket began to spin crazily and blur a little. I tried to sit up and then stared at the handcuffs on my wrists. The laughter came again.

I struggled upright to a sitting position and found myself in a hollowed out cavern lit by flickering candles. A grinning youth of not more than nineteen, his reckless face sprinkled with freckles, stood there with the empty canvas bucket, still laughing.

"Feelin' better?" Hal Thompson inquired with a guffaw. "Boy, old Cass sure laid it on with a gun when I clamped you around the guzzle."

Wentworth stood a few feet away, leaning indolently against a timber support, smoking and watching lazily. Joe Chadwick and Mark Eggers, the others of the trio, lounged on their bedrolls drinking from a bottle of whisky. Tessie sat alone on a rock over by the fire, staring dully into the small flames.

Wentworth pushed himself away from the joist and walked over and looked down, the button eyes bright. "I suppose Tessie has told you about how things are lined up, Fenway. When the boys missed her, it wasn't hard for them to figure where she was headed—straight to Claud Fenway's brother to spill it all. And that's just too bad for you, mister. Just plain tough luck."

His teeth bared themselves beneath the mustache and his right leg jerked back. He drove the toe of the small boot into my side, teeth still bared. "That's for the remarks you made about me not having any luck with Helen Carter," came his hissing voice; and then the boot again. "And that's for seeing her tonight."

I TOPPLED over and lay there curled up with hell's own fire in my ribs, trying hard to breathe and not groan. I heard the rattle of the collapsible bucket and Hal Thompson's chuckle. "Shucks, Cass, you shouldn't treat old Claud's brother thataway. He ain't used to it."

"Never mind. And now the three of you listen to me."

Boots crunched on rock and Tessie knelt beside me and placed a cool hand on my forehead. "Ed, I'm sorry," she whispered.

"It's all right," I managed to grunt out. "Not your fault, Tess."

". . . . that's the way you'll work it," Cass Wentworth's voice was saying. "And don't get in such a damned hurry this time. Give Jim or Helen time to open that vault. I'll be around but not in sight. With a dozen posses hunting you every place but this one, there'll be no risk. As soon as you get the vault cleaned out, hit for the timber and then circle right back here. Then I'll burn the breeze to the railroad to spread the news and to pick up telegrams that should tell me where the various posses are located. With that information, I'll send you out of here on an open path for a clean getaway."

Tessie whispered softly, "Ed, I didn't know about that when I came. I swear I didn't."

"I know, Tess," I said.

Joe Chadwick, a heavy featured young man of perhaps twenty-one, shifted his body and sat up on his quilt. He said, "Fair enough, Cass. We've already split Claud's pile three ways. By the time you get back with the news, we'll have the bank money split four ways and ready to roll. But what about Claud's brother and Tessie here?"

I had rolled over. I sat up in pain as Wentworth took a small key from his pocket and tossed it to Hal Thompson, his young cousin. "Back in the tunnel about a hundred yards is a cross tunnel. In the right wing of it you'll find a two hundred foot prospect shaft that goes straight down. Drop them into it sometime between now and nine in the morning."

Hal Thompson chuckled and repeated, "Shucks, Cass, you shouldn't treat old Claud's brother that way. He ain't used to it," followed by loud guffaws.

But that button-eyed little man whom I was just now seeing in his real light, already was striding into the tunnel toward the entrance. His departure left silence until Mark Eggers spoke drawlingly. "No use to look so scared, Tessie. We ain't in no hurry. How about some three-card monte, boys?"

They started playing cards and drinking from the bottle of whisky, but keeping a wary eye on Tess and myself. She had gotten some more water, pulled aside my shirt, and was bathing my side with cold packs. The game went on until nearly midnight, but any hopes I had that they would overdo the drinking were dashed. Chadwick finally threw down his cards with a good-natured

oath and rose. He picked up some piggin strings and a short length of rope and jerked his head at Tess. "Get over with your back against the joist, Tess, and sit down. No use doing this until we have to. Hal, you lock Fenway's hands around that other ceiling joist."

There was nothing to do but take it. There were three of them, and Claud's gun taken from me had been tossed over on a pile of tarp holding their food pack. Ten minutes later, after lighting three new long candles that would burn until daybreak, the three tough young desperados were snoring.

I looked over at Tess but she shook her head. "Not a chance, Ed. This piggin string—it hurts terribly on my wrists."

Poor Tessie Wright. Paying still more for the love she had given my wild brother. I said, "Not here either, Tess, but I've nothing to lose by trying. Watch them."

The red-headed, guffawing Hal had locked my arms in front of me around the joist, twelve inches of square timber. I picked up a sharp piece of quartz and began to scratch around the base. I began to sweat and my hands became raw as I worked around that piece of timber. . . .

JUST at daybreak Tess gave a warning hiss and I looked over at Chadwick stirring awake and began a frantic scramble to fill in the hole down around the bottom of the joist. Another hour and I would have made it. I looked over at Tess and some kind of a hopeless sigh went out of her.

"Sorry, Tess," I whispered. "I didn't have enough time."

They came awake, yawning and cursing good naturedly, and finished off the rest of the whisky. Hal Thompson stirred up the fire and Chadwick, who seemed to be the least callous of the three, gave Tess and myself a drink of water. He said, "I don't like this business at all, Fenway. But put yourself in our boots. There's a thousand apiece on us and we hang if we get caught."

"You'll hang anyhow, so what have you got to lose?" I asked him.

I saw him hesitate; saw Hal Thompson, he of the huge hands, straighten, his eyes flaming. "Cut that kind of guff, Joe!" he ordered harshly. "Cass says they go down the shaft and that's where they go."

I thought of Helen Carter, of that boot in my ribs because I'd gone to see her. I knew why *I* was going down. I felt sorry for poor Tess.

They ate and disappeared into the depths of the tunnel and came back leading three saddled horses. I looked at Tess, both of us thinking the same thing. The time had come.

But somewhere deep inside of Joe Chadwick there still remained something of what had been before he became just another wild young cowboy who had gone wrong. He adamantly stood fast, with a hand on his gun, determined to put off things until the very last minute. Then, after a time, they were gone, leading their horses along the tunnel to the brush-covered entrance.

I began to scratch dirt like a madman, circling that splintery joist like a chained wolf. Unmindful of bleeding hands, splinters in my arms, my ripped coat sleeves. The end of the joist came in sight and I let out a sharp cry to Tess. "I've got it, Tess! I've got it!"

"Then . . . you better hurry," she whispered with eyes closed. "My wrists. . . ."

Sound came from somewhere in the tunnel and I froze. They were coming back! Something had happened. I jerked savagely at the loose bottom of the joist, trying to push it to where I could get my manacled hands below it. They came free with blood on my wrists and I leaped for Claud's gun just as Pete and a half dozen other urchins came trotting into the place.

"Hey, Meester Ed—" he began.

"Pete, get me something to break these handcuffs!" I yelled at him. "Hurry!"

He stood there unmoving, he and the other, his mouth open. "These Gringos tell to me last night I am ascared to go into this mine with them because I am a Mexican," he began again. "We got lost—"

"Get going!" I yelled at him and leaped to where Tessie sat against another joist.

I got her hands free. Her wrists were swollen, purple, the thongs sunk deep into the flesh. I left her and went at a run into the tunnel and then sprinted toward the small spot of light up ahead. I broke through the brush into a tangle of rotting timbers buried beneath stalks of mullein. Rusty track rails and ancient spikes. And there— God bless it —lay an old spike hammer. I laid my wrists across a rail and yelled at Pete to hit those links. He hit them and my left wrist too.

I got up with my left hand dangling as Tessie came out leading her saddled horse. She handed over the reins wordlessly and I swung up. She knew. She saw Claud's six-shooter on my hip.

She said, "If you come out of it, Ed, will you be seeing Helen Carter again?"

I shook my head. "No, Tess. If I come out of it, I'll stop off at Lordsburg to have a stone sent out and then go on back home."

"Do you," she began hesitatingly, "really think I could go back, Ed? Nobody but you knows where I went."

"Whatever you think, Tess," I told her as gently as possible.

THE big horse leaped forward and buck-jumped down through the brush and began a hard half-mile run to the back of the bank in Bayless. Three horses were out in front when I slid Tess's mount on its haunches and leaped through the back door with Wild Claud Fenway's death dealing six-shooter in my right hand.

Eggers and Joe Chadwick were in the vault with canvas sacks, Hal Thompson stood on guard near the front door. Helen and Jim Henneford against a wall beside his desk, hands raised, the old man's fearless eyes flaming hatred. Thompson roared, "Look out!" and lifted his gun. Claud's .44 sent smashing sounds out through the front door and into the street as I shot him twice. He went down kicking and I spun just as Eggers leaped from the vault with a sack in both hands. He didn't have a chance. I put one just above the bridge of his nose and he dropped as limply as the money filled sack that fell from his dying grasp. Then it was Joe Chadwick.

"Chadwick, get out of here!" I roared at him. "Out the back door!"

I didn't see him go. I heard Helen scream, "Look out, Ed! *Behind* you," and spun toward the front door.

I caught one brief glimpse of Cass Wentworth's face, a spouting pistol in his right hand, and began to thumb them at him. I was still thumbing them when I went down, and the last glimpse I saw was of that pistol, blazing—blazing. . . .

Well, that's about all of it. I came out of it two days later, lying on Lawrence Carter's couch, covered with bandages and slated to limp slightly for the rest of my life. Claud was buried over in the old cemetery among the outlaws and miners and forlorn women and four Apaches. Beside him lay Hal Thompson, Eggers, Cass Wentworth, and Joe Chadwick. The hardware store clerk with the gold rimmed glasses had snatched up a .30-30 and shot Joe out of the saddle as he dashed west along the street.

The room was dead quiet when the haze lifted, and there was Helen and those two elderly women, and the older two again were tip-toeing toward the kitchen door. Helen came over and placed a cool hand on my head.

"You're going to be all right now, Ed," she said in that gentle way of hers. "A few sips of water and a little broth

for a time, the doctor said. But it will be a long, long time before you'll be up and around again. So you'll have to make the best of what care I can take of you."

I made the best of it, which wasn't difficult at all, and asked her about Pete. He was still in town, running wild with the kids, and it was three or four days before he could be rounded up in the mine and brought in. We were alone when he came into the room, grinning his dark faced Mexican grin.

"Hey, Mr. Ed. My father he tell to a man to tell me that if I don't come home he going to whip my breeches."

I asked him about Tessie Wright. Tessie? Yes, she'd gone back into the mine and brought out a pack horse carrying the saddle of a new man who hadn't lasted long. He'd last seen her riding west, past the graveyard.

Past the graveyard where Claud was to be buried. Past the bones of those other women who had sold themselves to any man with the price. Riding on. Alone. . . .

I said, "Okay, Pete, but I want Helen to write out a telegram to my folks and have you send it. Helen!"

She came in from the kitchen and brought paper and pencil. I dictated the message to Mom and Dad. Her face changed color and her hand began to tremble a bit as I added the last sentence; that I would be bringing somebody home with me when I came.

"Okay, Helen?" I asked her.

"Yes," she replied softly. "It's—it's going to be all right."

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The girl in the levis vaulted over the hitching rail

WIDOWS MUST MOURN

by RUSS WINTERBOTHAM

THE ROAD through Skillet was dusty, flat and straight. It cut the town like a knife. On the east side were livery stables, harness and blacksmith shops, feed stores and things that had to do with horses. On the west were the refinements needed by men and Civilization. Civilization with a capital C, because it was something very special in Skillet.

Mrs. Lucy Hardin pays a debt in Skillet, town of no law

On the west side of the street were four saloons, all of which had games of chance as well as hard liquor. One of them, the most popular, had girls who danced and gladdened the hearts of toil-scarred ranchers and cowboys—and took their earnings away from them.

There were a few other buildings on the west side of the street, but nobody noticed them.

It was ten o'clock in the morning when a buckboard rattled in from the north, with a team of skinny white horses pulling it. The buckboard slowed as it passed the saloons and came to a stop in front of one of the buildings nobody noticed, a bank.

The driver got out. The motion of yanking up levis, heavy laden with a sixgun at the belt, was so characteristically masculine that none of the loafers in front of the livery barn noticed for a moment that it was not a man. She had skin as brown from sun as any cowboy's, and her hair was tucked up under her Stetson, but a few wisps crept out from under the brim and showed up a sun-kissed brown.

A couturier might have frowned at her boots, her faded levis, her red flannel shirt and the yellow bandanna around her neck. A milliner would have hoorawed at her battered hat. A lady of elegance would have sneered at her sixgun and mule-skinner's gloves. But none of these people lived in Skillet.

Instead, Ralph Bisted, proprietor of the Elkhorn Saloon, rubbed his eyes. She was far prettier than any of the dance girls that distinguished his place from the other three places of entertainment in town.

Ralph had just come out of the bank and now he paused by the swinging doors in the entrance of his place and looked her over like a horse trader appraising a colt.

The girl paid him no mind. She got her horses tied to the hitch-rail, then reached into her shirt pocket and brought out a bag of Duke's Mixture and papers. Deftly she rolled a cigaret and stuck it between her lips. She scratched a match on the seat of her pants and lit it.

"It's plumb wicked the way women carry on nowadays," said Saloonkeeper Bisted. He turned and went into his place.

Mamie, one of the prettier and more buxom employees of the establishment, was standing at the bar sipping whisky. Bisted gave her a slap on the rear. He didn't like to have his girls drink at the bar. He wanted them to be strictly feminine.

Outside, the girl in the levis and Stetson took a couple of deep drags on her cigaret and then tossed it nervously aside. She vaulted over the hitching rail and walked straight into the bank.

AMOS WHITESIDE, the banker, looked up nervously from his ledger. He saw the sixgun first, and he always was nervous when anyone came into the bank wearing a gun. But as he noticed quickly that the wearer was a woman, he felt better. His nervousness changed to surprise. He looked into her eyes and saw that they were pleasant and felt glad she came in.

"Yes, ma'am?" Amos hopped nimbly to the barred teller's window.

"I'd like to see Mr. Whiteside," said the young woman.

The banker beamed politely. "I'm Mr. Whiteside."

The young woman appraised him. Amos couldn't decide whether the eyes were blue or green, but they were pretty. "I expected you to be an older man, sir," she said, without smiling.

Amos smiled. "I'm thirty and I'll be older tomorrow, it's my birthday," he said.

Now she smiled. It was a pleasant one, revealing white teeth and dimples in the corners of her mouth. "Congratulations and many happy returns," she said. "I'm Mrs. Lucy Hardin."

The banker sobered. There was genuine sympathy in his eyes when he spoke again, "Oh. I was very sorry to hear

about your husband, Mrs. Hardin."

Lucy shrugged. "So was I," she said simply. "A woman can't run a ranch by herself, although I did most of the work when he was alive. But he was handy."

"It was very sad. Very sad, Mrs. Hardin. My sympathies are with you."

"Who did it, Mr. Whiteside?"

The banker appeared not to hear the question. "Skillet's a rough town, Mrs. Hardin. The saloons are full of the worst kind of men—killers and gunmen."

"Doesn't the law do anything about murder?" she asked.

"The law called it self-defense," said Amos. "Witnesses said he had a gun in his hand when he died."

"The law ought to do something about the things that go on over there," she said, jerking her head in the direction of Ralph Bisted's Elkhorn saloon next door.

"There's not much law in Skillet," the banker shook his head, "except gun law." He patted the gun he had strapped at his side. "We have a marshal, but most situations are too much for him to handle."

"Unless a man's shot in the back, it's self-defense?"

The banker fussed with some papers which he stuffed into a drawer. "Don't be too bitter, Mrs. Hardin," he said. "There are a few people here that would like to see a change. So far we're in the minority."

Mrs. Lucy Hardin drew a deep breath. "My husband Mike owed you money before he got himself killed in that gun brawl."

"A small amount, Mrs. Hardin. Less than nine hundred dollars, if I remember correctly. There ought to be enough cows on your place to pay off the note with some to spare—that is, if you intend to sell out. Otherwise there's no hurry."

"I sold the cows yesterday," said Lucy. She reached into the pocket of her shirt and brought out a dog-eared check and placed it on the counter. "Also the ranch and all my household goods except my clothes, the team and buckboard. Take the note out of this."

The banker raised his eyebrows. "You should have notified me before the sale, Mrs. Hardin. You might have gotten into trouble over this. The man who bought it should have been careful—with the note against the ranch he wouldn't have a clear title."

"The man knew me," said Lucy, as if that explained everything.

Amos looked at Lucy. He had observed her eyes, her straight-forward manner, and now he saw something else. Her jaw was firm. To her a fact was a fact, anything else was dishonest. "I think I understand, Mrs. Hardin."

He picked up the check and looked at it. "It ought to tide you over for quite awhile, Mrs. Hardin. Do you want the balance in cash?"

"I'll be around town for awhile, better deposit it," she said.

The banker made out a deposit slip after checking his ledger on the note and interest. Finally he had arranged everything and handed Mrs. Lucy Hardin a bank book and her canceled note.

"Do you plan to stay in Skillet? A millinery store might do well here. Or do you have other plans?"

"I've got other plans," said Lucy. "I'm going to find the possum-eyed skunk that killed Mike. Who did it, Mr. Whiteside?"

The banker tightened his lips. There was a moment's pause and then he said, "If I may offer a suggestion, Mrs. Hardin, your husband is dead. Nothing can be done to bring him back. If you intend to deal out vengeance, you must remember that the man who shot him lives with his gun. He has killed other men and will probably kill again. He would kill a woman just as quickly as he'd kill a man. If I were you I'd live my life and not be an angel of vengeance." There was a slight accent on the word angel.

"I can handle a sixgun too," said Lucy. "And he wouldn't kill *this* woman if she saw him first."

She turned her back and stalked out of the door, leaving Amos Whiteside a little bit worried and with a feeling of admiration. He hoped she *could* handle a gun and that she wouldn't talk too much.

LUCY HARDIN took a room at the Skillet House, which were the rooms upstairs over one of the lesser saloons. Mrs. Marduff, who ran the hotel, took one look at Lucy and threw up her hands.

"You poor child," she said, "didn't your husband ever buy you any clothes?"

"Sure," Lucy told her. "He bought me these."

"I mean dresses."

"I like levis better," Lucy said.

Mrs. Marduff shook her head. "You don't understand, child. You're a widow. You gotta get yourself another man, and you won't do it in pants."

"The next man I marry won't care whether I wear pants or a potato sack," said Lucy.

Mrs. Marduff closed her eyes in helplessness. "Listen, gal. The best man on earth can be fooled with a little folderol. Take it from me, I've had four husbands. All of them died, too. Not one of them left me." Mrs. Marduff looked cautiously around to make sure none of her other guests were in hearing distance. "There aren't many women in town—exceptin' the floozies down at the Elkhorn—and you can have the pick of the town if you use the right tactics."

"From what I hear, this town doesn't have much to pick from."

Mrs. Marduff bit her lip and nodded violently. "You heard right. Listen, I can tell you a lot about the men in Skillet—and a few things about the women, too."

"Tell me."

Lucy listened for two hours and never heard the same story twice. Mrs. Marduff exhausted the citizens of Skillet and started working on some of the nearby ranchers when Lucy interrupted.

"Who were the men in that poker game when my husband was killed, Mrs. Marduff?"

The flow of language stopped. "Why do you want to know?"

"I want to know who killed Mike."

Mrs. Marduff studied Lucy for a moment. "I guess that ain't jewelry you're wearin' in that holster," she said. "But take my advice and don't run up against *him*."

"Who?"

"The man that killed your man. And take my advice, dearie, don't go around askin' people who did it. You're not foolin' anybody. You want to kill the so-and-so."

THE WIDOW HARDIN was a familiar figure in town before nightfall. She visited the city marshal. She called on the preacher and his wife. She dropped into the feed store, and put up her team and buckboard in the livery barn.

At every place she asked the same question: "Who killed Mike?" And from every one she got the same advice: Mind your own business.

That night Lucy Hardin went to her room at the Skillet House, pulled off her boots and dumped the dust on the floor. Then she fell back on the bed and slept like a baby.

The next morning Lucy went back to the bank. She wrote out a check for a hundred and fifty dollars and received the cash from Banker Whiteside. She took the money, put it in an envelope, wrote something on the outside and stuffed it into her hip pocket. The banker watched her, taking obvious pains to let her know he wasn't trying to pry into her affairs.

Then he said, "You've stirred up quite a bit of talk around town, Mrs. Hardin."

"I know. They think I should wear dresses."

"Not that."

"They don't think it's right I should smoke?"

"No, Mrs. Hardin. It's about that advice I gave you yesterday."

"I'm a little leery about gifts from strangers, Mr. Whiteside," said Lucy. "After all, I never knew you except from Mike's talk, before yesterday."

"Good advice should always be heeded," said the banker. "You've let it be known all over town that you're gunning for the man who killed your husband."

"I've got to smoke out the varmint," Lucy said.

"Not in this town," the banker's voice was stern.

"I learned a lot about the people here," Lucy said. "I talked a little, yes. But I listened a lot more. I heard something about almost everybody. Almost, I said. I know there ain't a saint in town. There's gossip even about the preacher, and I expect I could find out some about the preacher's wife. I know of six men that ain't true to their wives and four women who cheat on their husbands."

"You don't believe all the gossip, do you?" Amos Whiteside's voice was chiding.

"I don't believe half of it," said Lucy. "But there's some truth in all of it. Nobody's a saint. Even the ones they don't gossip about—they're the least saintly of all. I carry a gun, wear man's pants and roll my own cigarets. The town's already sure I'm no saint and there'll be more talk about me every day as long as I stay. But maybe my idea of sin ain't the same as them that do the talkin'."

"I'm sure. Lucy—Mrs. Hardin," said Amos, "that there's more saint in you than anyone who talks about you. You're honest. I knew that when you paid off Mr. Hardin's note."

"I always pay my debts," said Lucy, with a trace a bitterness.

"Vengeance isn't paying a debt."

"What I'm doing ain't vengeance," she explained. "I know the name of the man I'm after."

"Who told you?"

Lucy smiled. "Like I told you, the gossip I heard touched almost everybody—even you. I heard about the harness-maker's daughter and the schoolmarm. I heard you were the biggest catch in town. Don't get excited," she waved off an interruption, "I only half-believed it. But there was one name that wasn't mentioned in the gossip. People aren't afraid of you, or the preacher or the men who cheat on their wives. They're afraid of a killer—of a man who murders and calls it self-defense. They're afraid I'll go out and get killed and they'll have blood on their hands. They didn't talk about the man who killed my husband, but they talked about everybody else."

Lucy hitched up her trousers and went to the door. "You can't believe gossip, but what you don't hear ain't gossip." She opened the door and went out. Amos saw her turn in the direction of the Elkhorn Saloon.

Quickly the banker drew his sixgun from its holster and flipped open the cylinder to make sure it was loaded. Then he slipped the weapon back in its leather case.

He had just started toward the door when a robust woman entered. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Johnson," he said, "the bank's closed for the rest of the day."

"A legal holiday?" Mrs. Johnson wanted to know.

"No, ma'am. I have to make arrangements for a funeral."

He held the door, while Mrs. Johnson retreated. She went to the spring wagon hitched outside, in which her husband waited, flicking the flies off his horses' withers with a buggy whip.

"Funeral arrangements, my eye," said Mrs. Johnson irritably. "Maybe Banker Whiteside doesn't know I saw that Widder Hardin flippin' out of the bank just before I went in. Maybe he thinks I'm too dumb to guess he's gone chasin' after her."

"The widder's a pretty pert gal, ma," said Mr. Johnson.

"She smokes cigarets," said Mrs. Johnson. "Rolls 'em herself, just like a cowpunk."

"Lots of people can't do that," said Mr. Johnson. Later he was sorry he said it, because he didn't get a chance to talk again for forty-five minutes.

THE ELKHORN SALOON was a large, barn-like place. After one came through the swinging doors, he had a choice of going to the bar on the left, or to the tables on the right. A man, or group of men, who might choose the tables instead of the bar, was almost immediately joined by one of Bisted's dance girls.

These young women, who were called beautiful because they were voluptuous, wheedled the male customers into buying drinks as the prerequisite toward deeper and more profitable—for the house—sinning. After a certain number of drinks, weaker-willed customers were skilfully guided to the gaming tables in the back of the room.

The place was noisy and ribald, yet curiously casual. A winning streak at faro, a big pot of poker, or a lucky throw of the dice brought forth yells of delight. But the customers were curiously callous to all forms of violence. When it occurred, the main object was to get out of the way, instead of trying to stop it. Perhaps this was prudence, for very often the bystanders suffered most.

All manner of murder and mayhem had taken place in the Elkhorn Saloon. Avarice and greed were unmasked. Sin was so much in demand that hell had to be rationed and only the very expert were able to damn their souls.

Yet no woman, excepting the eight or ten dance girls, had ever entered the place until Lucy Hardin pushed open the swinging doors and walked inside.

The men standing at the bar and sitting at the tables had to look twice apiece to be certain they were not having a whisky vision. Almost as quickly, the eyes shifted a third time to Ralph Bisted, the proprietor, who was talking to a customer at the bar. Here was a situation unparalleled in the annals of Skillet's sinning.

Bisted looked up, looked away, looked back again at the girl in the doorway. He broke off his conversation with the customer, politely excused himself and adjusted his cravat.

Then he came forward toward the girl. He must have known who she was. Everybody in town knew who she was, yet his face, trained by poker, gave no sign.

Lucy thrust her right hand into her left-hand shirt pocket, pulled out the makings for a cigaret. She dumped some tobacco in the paper, and pulled the sack closed with her teeth. Not a golden flake of tobacco spilled on the floor.

"Welcome to the Elkhorn, ma'am," said Ralph Bisted. "May I serve you in any way?" He made a little bow, he smiled graciously and almost clicked his heels together.

Lucy put the cigaret in her mouth and put the papers and tobacco back in her shirt pocket.

"I'm Mike Hardin's widow," she said.

Ralph Bisted's hands hung limply at his side, but his right was a little less limp than his left, and it was raised ever so slightly toward the butt of his sixgun.

"Ah, yes! Poor Mike. You have my sympathies, madam. Is it possible that something of his is still here in the room that you wish to claim?"

Lucy's eyes traveled around the room. She noticed the men behind Bisted moving away to the right and to the left so there was a clear area behind him extending back to the rear wall of the building.

"Everything he ever had is gone, I reckon."

"Then what can I do for you?" Bisted's voice was not raised, yet it rang like a challenge in the silent room.

"I'm here for a job," said Lucy.

Ralph Bisted seemed to relax ever so slightly. He glanced toward the tables where his girls had been drumming up trade. All drinking had stopped. Every-

one was watching the two figures in the center of the room.

"I reckon I could use another girl," said Bisted. "Could you step into my office?"

The cigaret, dangling from Lucy's lips, moved up and down slowly. "I don't want a workin' job," she said. "I came to do one. You killed Mike, you yaller skunk, and I'm going to shoot you."

RALPH BISTED didn't move a muscle. His poker face had been well trained. The smile looked easy, natural and like it belonged there. He was watching Lucy, his hand inching up toward his sixgun. Her cigaret moved again.

"You're nervous, excited, ma'am. I'm sure no one told you I killed your husband." His voice was almost soothing, but his hand was moving upward. "May I offer you a light?"

The hand traveled up with a jerk. His palm slapped the handle of his gun with the crack of a whip. And then it failed to pull the weapon from its holster. He seemed to freeze as something white struck him in the face. He raised his hand to his eyes. "That dod-blasted tobacco! It's blindin' me!"

Lucy Hardin slowly raised her gun and shot off two of Ralph Bisted's toes.

As the echo of the shot died down, a voice came from the doorway. "This is an argument just between the two of 'em. Let's keep it that way."

Banker Amos Whiteside stood in front of the swinging doors with his sixgun in his hand while Lucy Hardin rolled another cigaret to replace the one she had spit into Ralph Bisted's eyes.

The saloon-keeper had his shoe off and was totaling up his losses.

Then Lucy stuffed Bisted's gun, which she had taken from the saloon-keeper's holster while he attended to his toes, into her belt, turned her back on forty-two wide-open mouths and eighty-four blinking eyes, and walked out of the door. Amos backed out behind her.

"Whew!" said Amos. "I thought you aimed to kill him."

"I did," said Lucy, "but I've never killed anybody before and it was hard to begin." She reached into her hip pocket and pulled out the envelope full of money and handed it to Amos. "I guess you can put this back in my account, Amos."

The banker saw the writing on the envelope: "For my casket. Give the rest to widows and orphans. Lucy Hardin."

"Do you reckon Bisted's going to go gunnin' for me?" Lucy asked.

"By the time he's able to walk again, the marshal'll have him in jail," said Amos. "The marshal won't be afraid to arrest him now that he's the laughin' stock of town—gettin' crippled by a girl!" Amos Whiteside looked reverently at Lucy as he opened the door of the bank to let her inside. "Mike Hardin was a lucky hombre to have a wife like you."

"He was a louse," said Lucy. "I didn't have good sense, or I'd never have married him. I was just a kid and I took the first man that came along."

Amos looked puzzled. "But you risked your life to avenge his death—you tackled the worst killer in the county."

"Not revenge, just payin' a debt," said Lucy. "I figured I owed him somethin', because I couldn't give him my love. Besides, a widow's gotta do some kind of mournin' and that was the best I could do."

Banker Amos Whiteside was very light-hearted indeed. He had just kissed Lucy Hardin and he knew she had better sense now than she'd had before.

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A NICKEL A NOVEL IN

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QUESTIONS HUNTING

Question: My twelve dollar tapered fly line got caught in my automatic reel last fall and was cut so severely that I had to break it at that point. Can you tell me how to splice it smoothly enough so that it will be strong and shoot through the guides? —Frank Zellick, Baraboo, Wis.

Answer: Yes. By following these instructions carefully you can splice your expensive line so that it will shoot through the guides and be as strong as ever. Scrape the finish off of both ends of the line back for a distance of one inch. Take a needle and fray out the line ends back for a distance of a half inch. Separate the frayed ends into equal parts and push them together like you would two forked sticks. Work the forked ends of each line end around the remaining uncoated portion of the opposite end. Lay one side of your splice on the edge of a table and put something heavy on it, like a flat iron. Now start wrapping the protruding end outward from the center with 00 silk. Wrap this as smooth and tightly as you can. Place this under your weight and wrap the other end of your splice. Coat the splice with finger nail polish and roll it between two smooth blocks of wood until it is perfectly round.

Using a different color of thread, so you can see what you are doing, put on another wrapping, starting slightly off center. Apply fingernail polish and roll again until round and smooth. Apply a coat of rod varnish and you have a new line. Be sure to fasten the ends of both wraps with a rod winding hitch.

Question: I'm thinking of getting a .22 caliber side arm for small game and plinking. Which one of the many would you recommend?—Phil Segun, Seattle, Wash.

Answer: There is only one way to know that you'll be satisfied with your purchase. A pistol is

like a woman. The one that suits one man may be another's poison. Recently I shot four of the top automatic pistols on the market. Two of them were in the highest priced grade and two in the cheaper. I found that one of the cheaper ones balanced the best in my hand, that I could do the best shooting with it. Another hombre, shooting beside me, found that one of the more expensive did the best work for him. He could beat me with his choice, but I could beat him with mine. Test your weapon before you lay out the hard cash.

I believe that in a .22 caliber it should always be an automatic or single shot. I have yet to see a revolver that would stand up under the thousands of rounds usually put through a cheap ammunitioned weapon of this sort without spitting lead between barrel and cylinder. In the larger calibers I prefer the revolver, with the old Frontier model being my favorite. It is a shame that these cannot be purchased new any more.

Question: One of my rod ferrules is bent and cracked. How do I go about replacing it.—Mrs. Ruth Edward, Vancouver, B. C.

Answer: It appears that a Canadian gal has fractured her rod on one of the big ones up north. Buy a new ferrule of good quality, Ruth, and of the same size as your old one. Heat the broken ferrule carefully over a candle while pulling on it with a pair of pliers. It should be inspected first to see if it is one of the old style, with a pin in it. If so, drive the pin in and forget it. Don't try to pull it out. The ferrule should come off easily before the rod is hot enough to be harmed.

Scrape off all old cement from the wood, and holding a stick of ferrule cement canted against the candle, drip cement on the rod, spreading it evenly with a heated knife blade. Heat the ferrule and push it on all the way. After cooling put on the wrapping at each end of the ferrule and finish off with a rod winding hitch. This is done by laying a short, doubled piece of thread on the rod and winding several turns over it. Shove the end of the wind thread through the double end of the short thread and pull the end of the wind under, so locking it. Apply varnish and let dry.

Question: Coyotes den up around our ranch but I can't seem to locate the dens. Have you any tricks up your sleeve on this?—Howard Crayman, Billings, Montana.

Answer: Coyotes den in late spring. Them

were the days, believe me, when we used to hunt for them, for bounty and for pets. In your country, Howard, late spring means an occasional snow skiff. Follow the trail of almost any coyote and sooner or later you'll come to a den at this time of the year, unless you are unlucky enough to get on the tracks of an old maid or a

bachelor. Few coyotes live in single bliss at this time of the year.

Question: What rifle caliber do you recommend for my country, where I hunt deer, elk, coyote and black bear. I don't want too much recoil.—Ron Thompson, Oakland, California.

Answer: I've hunted all over California. It is a mixture of desert, plain, brush and heavy forest, which complicates matters considerably when selecting a rifle caliber for all the types of game that you mention. I do not think, however, that I'd hesitate for a moment in taking on a .300 Savage, either in the Savage or the varied bolt actions.

My reasons for this are that this caliber has a fairly flat trajectory for long range work on prairie or desert country, yet has power enough to knock down anything you'll meet in California, even taking grizzly bear in a pinch, yet has less recoil than a 30-06, and others. The .300, if shot with the 150 grain slug, will give you almost identical trajectory figures of the .30-06, one of our best long range game rifles, when using the 180 grain slug in the 06. The figures are for the .300, 0.7 inch drop at 100 yards, 3.0 drop at 200 yards, 7.5 at three hundred yards—ditto for the .30-06 with 180 grain bullet. You don't hit 'em quite as hard with the .300 but you hit 'em as fast.

Another fine cartridge for you would be either the 250-3000 Savage cartridge or the 257 Roberts. The latter has an 8 inch drop at 300 yards and a very light recoil.

Question: What is the proper way to carry a rifle on the saddle? What rifle carries with the least inconvenience?—Bill Vaghn, Reading, Pa.

Answer: In brushy and treed country the rifle should be carried in the saddle scabbard with the butt slightly elevated and pointing toward the rear of the horse. The plains cowboy usually carried it with the butt forward, under the stirrup skirt, not having any brush to catch on it. The rifle is carried on the right side, so that it will not interfere with mounting; at least I always carried mine that way, even though I'm left handed. There has never been a rifle made, in my opinion, that could be carried more easily on the saddle than the Winchester model 1894, in lever action and 30-30 or 32 special caliber.

Mine has been rolled on, stepped on, dropped, yet it is still in perfect condition after over thirty years of use.

Question: Are there many bears left in the west and are they very dangerous to hunt?—Clyde Shomalt, Holyoke, Mass.

Answer: I took off from Holyoke, Clyde, when I started west nearly fifty years ago, a toddler, and I was thinking about bears and Indians then,

believe me. Yes, there are many bears in the west. I imagine that there are a good many within five miles of my cabin in Oregon as I write. They are mostly browns and blacks, with a few grizzly left in Wyoming and perhaps Idaho and Utah. The coastal grizzly seems to have gone the way of all flesh. But some of the blacks are really big. You can never take chances with any bear, but I'd say that with any care at all blacks are not very dangerous to hunt. I've seen them killed with a twenty-two rifle, but wouldn't want to tackle one that way myself. I know of several instances, and recently, where black bears have fought back against men.—F. H. A.

HEAVEN on a HANDCART

by William Ratigan

A TANTRUM of nature stranded seashells almost three miles high on mountain peaks, and, like carpets laid by a madman, the sage-patterned prairie unrolled below and the desert shimmered in a pastel haze. Then the first pioneers came—the snow-born, rain-fed streams—serpentining from the crest of the Great Divide, taking wrinkled time to chart their courses and worry channels through the barrier reefs.

The streams aged into rivers, and along their flanks dimpled the tracks of pronghorn and bison, wearing trails down the carved canyons and across the sweet-grass valleys. Two-footed tracks followed the four-footed spoor, and the trails, worn hard and smooth and deep by shuffling centuries of pagan moccasins and priestly sandals, became webbed routes for the makers of maps, the trappers of fur, the hunters of gold —for those who had to pocket fear and ride faith across the Missouri onto the Big Medicine Road.

Among the faith riders were the Handcart Mormons and Ruth Cash of Council Bluffs. A small-boned girl in her early twenties, she stood on the eastern bank of Old Muddy, her petticoats

A Bright Flame of Faith Guides Ruth Cash Across the Rockies

skirled by the wind, the baby cradled in her arms, and her eyes big with trouble under a coal-scuttle bonnet.

On the far side of the yellow swirl of water, she saw the fluttering Conestoga tops and the tents of the argonauts who already had been ferried across the Missouri. Tiny figures in calico and buckskin were kindling campfires for the evening meal, and the lowing of oxen sounded from a makeshift corral.

One year ago to this day, Jim had been camped over there, ready to trek toward the Shining Mountains in the morning. From August to August she had waited, and no word had come by prairie schooner or by clipper ship beating around the Horn. Now she would wait no longer. Wherever he might be, she must go to meet her husband and bring him the son he had never seen.

WITH this resolve burning in her heart, Ruth Cash walked down the bluff to the ferry station and sought out the captain of the caravan lined up to make the crossing. Lounged against a wagon wheel, he held a bullwhip in one hand and combed his black beard with the other.

"I'm real sorry, ma'am," he said at last, ducking his head at the baby. "We'd like to obilge you, but we're on slim rations now and we'll need every lick and crumb of food we got. Just can't afford to take on a couple of extra pilgrims without an outfit."

"I can work," Ruth said. "I'll do anything."

He cracked his bullwhip as if he were lashing out against the forces that made him refuse. "Maybe you'll be glad I turned you down, ma'am. We'll be lucky to make it, heading out this late in the season. You can get a lot safer start, come spring. . . . And don't worry too much about your husband. Mail from the West is easy delayed and easier lost."

She threaded her way from the caravan to the wooden sidewalk, and her shoulders were squared against disappointment. A voice hailed her from behind, and a hairy hand grabbed her elbow.

A slab-shouldered, sucker-mouthed man of about thirty looked down from his hulking height and laughed. "Kind of overheard what you told Mister Godalmighty." He jerked a thumb backwards. "Me and three pals got a wagon in that train, and we'll smuggle you aboard—if you want to work your passage."

"Work my passage?"

"Sure, you said you'd do anything." His lips were loose and moist. "But I reckon work ain't the right word, not by a jugful—"

She slapped his stubbled cheek so hard that her palm tingled all the way to the boarding house. Baby Jim still gurgled happily over the wild ride when she put him in his trundle bed.

Mrs. Toothaker opened the door off the kitchen without knocking. Her long face loomed stern and righteous. "Supper's at six and you're supposed to be here to wait table and otherwise pay for your keep." The landlady's voice shrilled. "Or maybe your man's sent you a gold mine by mail so you can set on your behind and not wrestle with dirty dishes tonight." The door slammed.

Over the dishes, Ruth polished up a scheme she had planned only as a last resort. It was better for a wife to steal from a stranger than to sell her husband's honor.

In her own room again, she lit a fresh candle in the hollowed-out turnip that served as a holder. The dancing flame revealed cheap Currier prints on the walls, a dog-eared copy of Godey's Lady's Book beside the sewing basket on a small table, and, in the place of honor on the bureau, a daguerreotype of a young man with a banjo on his knee.

The likeness had been taken in Baltimore, a week after she had run away from home to marry him against her parents' will. She remembered how the funny little photographer had hopped around the studio in birdlike rage. "The pose must be held for at least one min-

ute!" he had screamed. "Can't you stop fidgeting for just one minute?" And, finally, he had clamped Jim's head between a pair of metal prongs skillfully arranged so they would not show in the picture. "There!" he had said. "That'll hold you!"

BUT the face in the daguerreotype was blurred, proof that not even metal prongs could curb Jim's restless spirit. With eyes forever bent upon the next town, the next job, the something hidden beyond the hills, he had brought her here to the last jumping-off place. The baby was heavy within her by then, and her time was only two months away, but knowing how he felt, she had urged him to go on and send for her in the spring.

"I'll manage," she had smiled, but, beyond the smile, her heart cried out for him to stay.

She had managed—with the warm help of a dancehall girl who had spanked life into the new-born baby—with the cold charity of Mrs. Toothaker who had made her a slavey when Jim's room-and-board money ran out in the spring.

Ruth Cash could have managed much easier, but a woman has pride. There was a half-finished letter on the bureau and she skimmed the first few lines:

Dear Mama and Papa: You'll be glad to hear that I am getting along fine and don't need any help from home, but it was sweet of you to offer. Jim has struck it rich in California and by today's mail came a necklace of gold nuggets— imagine! He wants me to join him out there and—

A light tap on the door announced the entrance of Audrey Semple, the dancehall girl who—because of her profession—paid three times the usual price for the privilege of rooming upstairs. Her clothes were gaudy and she glittered with imitation jewels, but her glance was soft as butter on the baby.

"Stop mooning over that picture," she scolded. "He's probably got him another woman by now—that's why you haven't heard."

"Hush your funning. It's not so. But he might be down and out and too discouraged to write, or sick, or—"

Audrey's arms went around her in a fierce hug. "His kind don't die," she comforted. "They break our hearts and run away and send us kiting after them on wild goose chases, but they don't die. You're a fool to follow him, but I wish I had enough to grubstake you."

"I'll get an outfit somehow," Ruth said quietly. "Did you remember?"

"Sure." Audrey handed her a tiny vial of colorless liquid.

"If my nose was longer, I'd ask what you're aiming to do with knock-out drops."

"Thanks for not asking. And—may I borrow one of your dresses, and a hat?"

"You won't look like a lady, but help yourself." Hand on hip, Audrey swayed toward the door, and turned. "If I said you was headed for trouble, you'd only get more stubborn, so—good luck, kid."

After Mrs. Toothaker went to bed, Ruth whisked upstairs, rummaged in Audrey's closet, and came down with an armful of clothes. She chose a dress all spangles and rhinestones, and a bonnet towering with pink ostrich plumes. The cracked mirror leered as she applied rouge to her cheeks.

From the kitchen she took an earthen jug of elderberry wine Mrs. Toothaker hoarded for medicinal purposes, and set two glasses alongside it on the small table. She picked up the baby and he went greedily to her breast, his cheeks hollowing out in the long sucks that sent him to sleep.

Fastening her bodice, she laid him in his trundle bed and shoved it under the large one, pulling a blanket over the side so it could not be seen. Out she went then, into the street at an hour when no respectable woman could appear without an escort, and her slippers tip-tapped swiftly on the wooden walk.

IN THE heart of the saloon district, she pushed through the batwinged doors of the Golden Swan. Her eyes toured the long bar, the games of chance—and she made her choice. Wearing a broad-

cloth coat and a hight beaver hat, he sat alone at a table in the far corner, shuffling a pack of cards. Prosperity gleamed from the huge diamond on his ring finger. He had a wide, reckless mouth and sleepy eyes, and he offered her a chair with a bow that would have taught manners to a New Orleans' dandy.

"I'm Chance O'Rory," he said. "You don't belong here, but I'm glad you came." His quick fingers rippled the cards to a silver cascade, and he flipped five of them face-up on the center of the table.

Absorbed in the hand he had dealt, his eyes lost some of their sleepiness. "The cards never lie," he said, "but they can be read seven ways from Sunday. You've got a busted straight—ace of spades, queen of hearts, jack of diamonds, ten of hearts, and deuce of clubs. The first three are a cinch, but I don't figure the ten or the two-spot. Do they mean anything to you?"

Ruth Cash had been married two years and the baby was ten months old, but the cards were mere pasteboard and O'Rory's fortune-telling meant nothing to her—nothing, that is, beyond indicating his gullibility, for which she was grateful.

A careless boot kicked her chair and she looked up to see the slab-shouldered, sucker-mouthed man of her afternoon escapade. He was reeling, roaring drunk, and the chip on his shoulder was a Yuletide log. "Too good for me and my pals, was you? But not too good for a slicked-up tinhorn, you lousy little—"

Chance O'Rory's movements were too fast to follow. All she saw was his fist—a battering ram against a stubbled jaw. The slab-shouldered, sucker-mouthed man hurtled backwards, colliding with a table that broke under his weight and spilled cards and chips on his limp body. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth, and Ruth watched it stain the floor as a dance-hall girl screamed and keeled over in the arms of a bullwhacker.

"Shall we go?" suggested O'Rory, offering his arm and guiding her through pademonium. "This is no place for a lady."

On the way home, she told him that she was far from a lady, and he accepted an invitation to spend the night in her room.

They tiptoed up the back porch and stole through the kitchen, but as Ruth lit the candle she realized her failure to hide Jim's picture. O'Rory stared at the daguerreotype, hummed a snatch of *Oh Susannah,* and whispered something about Fate dealing a straight game, with only one jack of diamonds in the deck.

It was gambling lingo and nonsense to Ruth, so she mentioned the wine and turned her back to pour it because she had business with a tiny vial.

No suspicion clouded O'Rory's face. He offered a toast—"To Lady Luck, the Queen of Hearts"—and drained the glass.

Waiting for the knock-out drops to take effect, she wondered what to do if he tried to take her in his arms and claim the privileges of her invitation, but it was worry wasted. He took out the cards from his pocket, and, while she sipped her wine, flipped out the same hand he had dealt in the Golden Swan.

A little cat of curiosity crawled out on her tongue and asked: "Why are you called Chance?"

"Because I'll take a chance on anything. Because I'll bluff on a bobtail flush and bet the limit on a busted straight like this. Because I'll play a hunch to the end—and then some. Because I—" His voice had begun to thicken, and he knuckled his eyes.

SHE DREW away from him, alert and cautious. He staggered from the chair and pitched forward across the bed. But, before his eyes closed, he mumbled like a sleeptalker: "When you've got a—real sucker—don't need—knock-out drops. I'm playing—this hand—to finish."

Now she could take his wallet, buy an oxen-drawn Conestoga, join the caravan,

and drive to Jim. But searching an unconscious man was harder than she had expected. O'Rory's body was a dead weight, her search a dead loss. He carried no wallet, no money-belt, no poke. There were a pair of dice in his pantaloons and a brace of derringers up his broadcloth sleeves—nothing else.

She felt cheated until the diamond winked in the candlelight, winked and told her that here was money to purchase an outfit. But the ring would not come off O'Rory's finger. She tugged, she greased it with lard, and still it would not slip over the knuckle.

The night closed in about her and the baby whimpered to be fed. A third candle guttered in the turnip holder, and gray dawn climbed through the window. Audrey, who might have helped, had not come home and Ruth Cash sat in a trap of her own making—a blunted knife in her hand—for the diamond refused to be pried loose from its setting.

She heard the slow squeak of Mrs. Toothaker's shoes on the staircase, and O'Rory awakened. He yawned and shook his head, he scratched and stretched, he squinted at her face and started to laugh.

Ruth shushed him, but the damage was done. Mrs. Toothaker threw open the door and condemned them with her washed-out eyes. A female Jeremiah, she blasted Ruth with the Old Testament and branded her seven kinds of harlot, but she wound up the tirade in frontier style: "Pack up instanter and hit the grit!"

It took small time for Ruth to gather her things and leave the house. O'Rory carried the carpetbag, and, with a poker face, listened to her apology and explanation. "Settles one point," he said. "Your baby's the ten of hearts."

Her steps dragged, but his were jaunty, and the wide, reckless mouth curved into a smile. "Next time you rob a man," advised O'Rory, "make sure he hasn't just finished betting a full house against four kings."

He steered her to the ferry station, bowed, and promised to return. She sat on the bank, waiting, because there was nothing else to do, and watched Old Muddy—heedless of time—roll by in a yellow flood. The grizzled ferryman hitched up his galluses and sauntered over, hungry for conversation.

"Business is slowed to a stand-halt," he remarked. "Last wagon train of the year pulled out before sunup. Unless you was to count the shebang I just hauled across. Ain't that a sight for sore eyes and aching hearts?"

On the opposite side of the Missouri, Ruth saw the weirdest of all westward migrations—a party of Mormon families lining up to renew travel. A prairie schooner headed the line, and she counted three more bulky wagons, but in between were scores of odd little vehicles that looked like—

THE FERRYMAN nodded. "Handcarts, ma'am! Made of green wood and ready to bust. Handcarts with wooden hubs, ma'am. Wait'll the dust and sand of the far prairies cuts and slashes at those wheels. And the Mormons, ma'am—you can see from here how half-starved and all-ragged they are. Took 'em more than a month to foot it from Iowa City, and they got a thousand miles to go for Salt Lake. Women and youngsters and graybeards hoofing across the worst country in the world toward the howling time of year when blizzards jump from the high ranges and the white freeze crouches down. I warned 'em, ma'am, but you can't warn a Saint headed for Heaven on a handcart. There's something inside them—"

"It's *faith*," Ruth said very slowly. "And it's stronger than death."

"I reckon." Thoughtfully, the ferryman sucked on a hollow tooth. "Faith can't move mountains—never did. But it moves multitudes across 'em—always will. Heard a preacher say that once, ma'am, and it was right pretty the way he strung the words together, but, take me, I'd mix horse sense with faith and start out next June on the Big Medicine Road."

"You'd never make a gambler, friend." Neither of them had heard Chance O'Rory approach, and they whirled at his voice. No longer elegant, he wore a shapeless slouch hat, a rough knee-length coat, a vivid red shirt, and trousers tucked into heavy top boots. The diamond was missing from his ring finger and he stood between the shafts of a handcart piled high with provisions.

"We'd have traveled in style," he told Ruth, "but a gambling man wants a flashy diamond and isn't picayunish about flaws—like a trader."

Ruth's eyes were brighter than any jewel. "If the Mormons can make it, we can," continued O'Rory. "There's a buffalo robe for the Ten of Hearts, a Dutch oven for the Queen, and rations for ninety days should see us through. I haven't any plans for the rest of the year, so I'll sit in on this hand if I'm welcome."

The flabbergasted ferryman looked on and gave advice and sucked a troubled tooth. He said it was late August, he mentioned the Donner Party, and he spoke to the wind.

"Everyone has a right to try for Heaven on a handcart," O'Rory's wide, reckless mouth twitched a heathen grin. "Cut the deck for high card, friend. It's double or nothing for our fare across the Missouri."

It was nothing, for the ferryman cut the deuce of clubs and O'Rory turned up the ace of spades.

"You win—on the death card," said the ferryman, and the gambler's sleepy eyes narrowed, and a cloud seemed to drift across them. But then he winked at Ruth and he pulled the handcart off the ferry onto the western shore of Old Muddy and greeted the Mormons in a way that made them glad to have him for company.

A Mormon bugle startled the air. The captain of the Saints, mounted on a mule, rode up and down the line, barking orders. Prairie schooners lurched from the ruts as bullwhips cracked and oxen leaned against their yokes. But handcarts made up the bulk of the procession, and it was man-power and shank's mare against nature as the long snake started winding across the plains.

O'RORY strode between the shafts, the baby bounced on his buffalo robe atop the provisions in the cart, and Ruth pushed from behind. She had the strength of faith, the drive of duty, the spur of hope. Somewhere ahead, she would find Jim.

It was a wondrous cavalcade, for the captain, each noon, shot the sun with a sextant as if he were on the sea, and a clumsy contrivance on the wheel of one wagon ticked off the miles as they moved through an ocean of wildflowers and flushed coveys of outlandish birds. Sometimes the roadometer registered five miles from red of dawn to red of dusk, and, on occasion, it rose to fifteen, and, as the Conestogas jolted and jounced, fresh cream churned into butter in the wheel buckets.

On the downhill grades, O'Rory handled the cart alone, and Ruth, the baby at her breast, walked off the trail into fairyland, picking flowers and hoarding seeds in a small bag.

At night, when the carts and wagons drew up in a circle, the gambler pitched his blankets at a respectful distance from hers and they listened to the Mormons make merry around the campfires, for these were the fat days, with a pound of flour for each, and mouthharps and fiddles put fresh life into weary feet. At one campground, they celebrated a wedding and christened a baby. On the Sabbath they rested.

"Foolishness," growled O'Rory. "We're racing against winter."

"It's their religion," said Ruth Cash.

"There is no God but Lady Luck," scoffed O'Rory, "and she's a fickle jade."

Wheels rolled and the Mormons sang:

> For some must push and some must pull
> As we go marching up the hill;
> So merrily on the way we go
> Until we reach the valley,O!

The prairie unfolded and the names rolled back—Alcove Springs and Inde-

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pendence Crossing, the Big Blue and Rock Creek Station, Grand Island and Fort Kearny, the Platte Valley and the Sunflower Trail. Then they saw a steeple of stone in the distance—Chimney Rock, the landmark halfway between the Missouri and the valley of the Great Salt Lake, and they spent all one day traveling toward it and all day the next putting it out of sight behind. The floor of the earth began to change and the alkaline ground seemed to be whitened with frost.

But the Saints still sang:

> Long before the Valley's gained
> We will be met upon the plains
> With music sweet, and friends so dear
> And fresh supplies our hearts to cheer.
> And then with music and with song
> How cheerfully we'll roll along
> And thank the day we made the start
> To cross the plains with our handcart.

They traveled—in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night—the dust smoking up from the wheels and the flaming campfires praying to the stars. Beside the trail they began to see abandoned possessions — everything from sugar sacks to mattresses and cook stoves—and the piles of stone or mounds of earth pointing to lonely graves.

On a weatherbeaten board—*Here lies*: A name and a date.

Beyond Chimney Rock, the country began to change from prairie-fire ashes and dust to winesap air and mountain streams and firs towering from the foothills. While Ruth looked on in big-eyed wonder, O'Rory tickled a trout from the water, and they both gazed in awe at the ten-inch track of a grizzly. It was then that the gambler made her take one of his derringers—just in case.

Now, death lay in wait along the Big Medicine Road. Fanged rattlesnakes warned and struck with incredible speed. Bedclothes had to be searched each morning for torpid reptiles who cherished human warmth during the dark hours. In the middle of a night Ruth was awakened by a chorus of wolves singing to the full moon and O'Rory's wild laugh rang out when she whispered

that one of the wolves was taking the soprano lead.

AS THE country changed, the weather followed suit. They were moving into autumn, and the sun lost its warmth and the stars shone brighter. Blue-bolted cloudbursts lashed them with biting hail that drew blood. They staggered through quagmires and across quicksand, hurrying their carts.

The carts gave out first, not the bodies. The handcarts whined and squeaked and squealed. No one had remembered to bring axle grease and precious bacon had to be used to silence the shrieking wooden hubs.

So they went—on wobbly wheels, toiling up the eastern slope of the continental divide. Their shoes became thin and their cheeks hollowed, and they tightened their belts. Individual rations were reduced to two ounces of flour daily, and Ruth watched a Mormon woman make a kind of porridge and serve it to her family of eight. At night they huddled close to their buffalo-chip fires and slept until shivering dawn. By day, dull eyes creased to marvel at the mighty sculpturing of God—the blue gorges, the black canyons, the white-hatted mountains.

They sang, but not so loud and not so hopefully, and the names rolled back—Scott's Bluff and Wild Cat Range, Teton Springs and Fort Laramie. Rocky Mountain Bighorns leaped from crag to crag, antelope resembled mere jackrabbits as they streaked across plateaus and clouds of buffalo thundered south.

Beyond Fort Laramie, they ran into sand that cut like quartz, and even the oxen had to be fitted with leather boots.

On a raw morning, they reached a ferry crossing on the North Platte and the Mormon captain rode his mule ahead to inquire about tolls. But he came back with a bitter face. All the money they could scrape together would not cover the high tolls, and they went downstream to a ford.

[*Turn page*]

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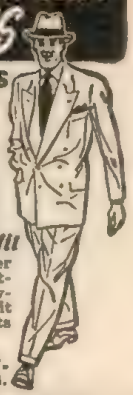

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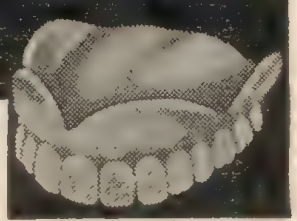

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O'Rory dared the crossing first. Ordering Ruth into the handcart to hold the baby safe, his hands took a deathgrip on the shafts and he plunged into the cold torrent. The shock of the water whirled his breath away, and, in midstream, he stumbled but righted himself and went on. He staggered through the shallows and lurched up the opposite bank, a sodden wreck with purple lips, his breath coming in gasps and shudders.

ON HIS HEELS came the Mormons. A prairie schooner bobbed out of control as oxen thrashed in panic. Two handcarts were swept away and never recovered, but O'Rory saved the children.

Finally all were across—bedding and clothing soaked, flour and sugar ruined. As the line formed again, a wind knifed from the mountains and everything was touched with frost. Garments became sheaths of ice and skirts and trousers crackled as the handcarts rolled.

That night, snow fell, and in the morning seventeen bodies were buried in a common grave. A Mormon closed the funeral service with the benediction: "They have gone to a better land."

"That's a cinch," said O'Rory. "There can't be a worse." He sneezed and his sleep eyes were feverish, but the wide, reckless mouth mocked her when Ruth asked him to let her draw the handcart while he rested.

Bitter days passed, and the mountains came to meet them and walked all around them and never seemed to get any closer. Death stalked the handcarts and it came to seem a strange thing if they left a camping ground without holding a burial. Fathers dropped between the shafts, and mothers, pushing from behind, fell down and never rose again. Wolves howled, and cattle disappeared in the night.

The tumbled mountains, like a giant's playthings, lay scattered across the world. Red Buttes loomed, and they drew up their dwindling circle of hand-

carts at the base of Independence Rock where the Sweetwater snarls, after raging through Devil's Gate. The rock rose from the ocean of land as if it were the fossilized remains of some prehistoric whale. It drew them all—this great registry of the desert where countless pioneers before them had carved or painted their names on the ice-polished stone.

There among the storied scrawls of Bridger and Fremont, Ruth found the first sign of her husband—Jim Cash, and the date he had arrived the year before. Her fingers traced the name, and O'Rory's eyes traced the fingers.

And the route crawled West!

Death laid the milestones. The wayside graves made signs of the cross for mercy in an alien land. Ruth Cash searched the names on frost-bitten boards. Sometimes only a cairn beside the trail guarded a nameless body from the wolves, and then quick tears would freeze on her cheeks. Once, on a patch of rock whisk-broomed by the wind, she saw an ox skull and shrank away from the bleached leer. One clanking steel-hard morning marks of violence were plain in the snow for O'Rory to interpret: a broken wagon wheel to match a broken body that had spilled out its red life from a bullet hole in a sucker-mouthed face. He had no dignity even in death, the slab-shouldered brute, but gone in empty time was his power to harm Ruth Cash or anyone, and she gently closed his sun-scorched eyes.

"The cowards never started; the weaklings died along the way."

There were the weak in body and the weak in spirit, the cowards of the flesh and the cowards of the soul. Only the strong in all ways could walk the Big Medicine Road—only the strong ones with the faith that moved men and women across mountains. Ruth Cash could never have put the thought into words, but her stumbling feet never stopped—except to tend the baby or help O'Rory.

It is seven hundred miles from the Missouri to darkling South Pass, and the

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handcarts, expecting a steep, walled cleft, were pushed and pulled across a gently undulating plain to the place where snow-born rivers start flowing east and west toward the oceans. The faithful walked along the high rim of the continent and went down the other side, with the Wind River Mountains to starboard and Table Rock to port of the one remaining prairie schooner.

"It's all downhill sledding from here," said O'Rory, but he said it to be comforting and not from any conviction, and his cheeks were fever-flushed to match the hacking cough in his lungs. Ruth Cash pushed harder than ever at the handcart, trying to make things easier for a man who would rather die than quit.

THERE had to be an end sometime, and it came only a day's journey beyond the fork in the Big Medicine Road where the Sublette Cutoff turned north for Oregon and Brigham Young's Trail edged south for Salt Lake. In the shadow of a rock in a lonely land, the Mormons made their last camp and the captain butchered his mule, and he said it was better to winter here than to try to go further, because surely God and Brigham Young would send help.

Chance O'Rory looked at the skeletons of the Saints, their sunken eyes still gleaming with faith, and he looked at the bloated bodies of starving children, and he muttered something about God and Brigham needing a mite of prodding.

Before a pale yellow sun jumped out of the frosty ground, the gambler stole away from the Mormon camp, determined to bring help to the doomed Saints. Behind him came the creak of a handcart, and he turned to see Ruth Cash and her baby.

"You can't go alone," she said. "You're sick."

There were white blinding days followed by black soul-less nights. Ruth lost track of time and fever patched O'Rory's cheeks. Down Echo Canyon he pulled the handcart and his cough came

back from a thousand rocks. Ruth's cold fingers touched his forehead and were warmed by a furnace. She knew that he was dying on his feet, but when he collapsed between the shafts her cry of horror reverberated through the ghostly canyon. Somehow she managed to get him in the cart beside the baby and carried on. Her shoes wore out and she tied rags around her feet, and the handcart seemed to weigh a ton.

Only fresh meat could save them. Her breasts were running dry, the baby cried for food, and O'Rory babbled about Creole dishes in his delirium.

She saw a buffalo caught in a snowdrift. His massive head seemed to shoot smoke and fire as he bellowed and rolled his red eyes. More afraid of missing him than of being hurt, she pulled the trigger against his shaggy side. It meant broth for O'Rory, new milk to her breasts, and strength to continue.

But still the mountains marched ahead in blue and white files and tiptoed around her in purple robes and starched nightcaps. The cold was a solid wall and toward the end of an afternoon as she

[*Turn page*]

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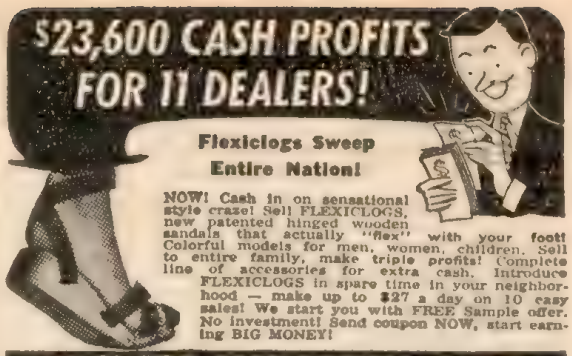

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stumbled up another of the eternal slopes to a summit, she wandered off the trail and fell. She might have stayed where she had fallen and yielded to the white silence and the long sleep, but rocks bruised her knees and her numb fingers, striking fire into flesh; and her head was cut by something else. As the blood trickled, she looked at a weather-beaten board and her eyes darkened as they spelled out a name.

Ruth Cash built a fire that night beside her husband's grave. She nursed the baby and spooned broth into O'Rory's mouth.

All along, her heart had known, but it is not right that a man's last resting place should go unmarked by his wife and his son. So she took her bag of flower seeds and on his grave she planted a remembrance from every mile of the Big Medicine Road. Each spring the dead return. . . .

In the morning, O'Rory's brow was cool and the baby laughed from the buffalo robe. Ruth Cash turned her back on the grave, for she had the living to worry about and a handcart to pull, and she climbed to the summit of the rise.

AT THE TOP, she halted and rubbed her eyes, for it was a mirage or magic. She looked again and knew it was no mirage. The mountain fell away and the Valley of the Saints beckoned below. She saw the checkerboard of harvest fields, blue smoke curling from chimneys, and, in the distance, the silver mirror of Great Salt Lake.

Then the tears came, flooding the view.

"Ruth," called O'Rory, and she went to him.

His voice was weak, but somehow that made his apology sound all the stronger.

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The genial blasphemy brought a frown to her forehead. Then the way he looked at her banished the frown. But, when he tried to climb out of the cart and help, she pushed him back roughly. "Until you get well," said Ruth Cash, "I'll manage."

"Manage is a trifling word," replied O'Rory, and his eyes said the rest of it, speaking for his heart.

Ruth Cash took her place between the shafts of the Mormon handcart again, and her rag-wrapped feet moved in a dream into the valley. She was just a small-boned girl with a pinched face framed by a coal scuttle bonnet, but Brigham Young's scouts, riding to meet her, recognized the stamp and brand of the pioneer—a lilt in her step to spurn yesterday, and a glow in her eye to welcome tomorrow.

Answers to Questions on Page 105

1 A "lady broke" horse was not broken by a lady but for a lady, that is, gentle enough for a lady to ride.

2 The border draw was a cross draw. A right-handed man hung his gun on his left hip, butt forward and drew by reaching across his body. It was popular along the border.

3 A good whittling horse was a skillful cutting horse. He could "whittle" one cow out of a herd.

4 A Judas steer is the trained steer which leads the others up the ramp to their doom in the slaughterhouse.

5 A salty rider is a man with courage; a salty bronc is a mean horse. If you asked the horse he might think the reverse.

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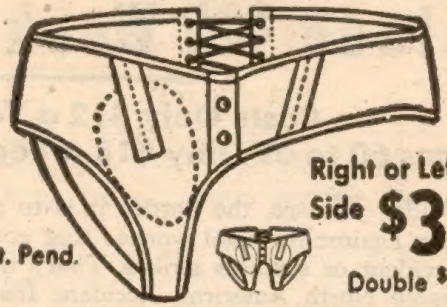

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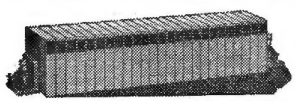

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